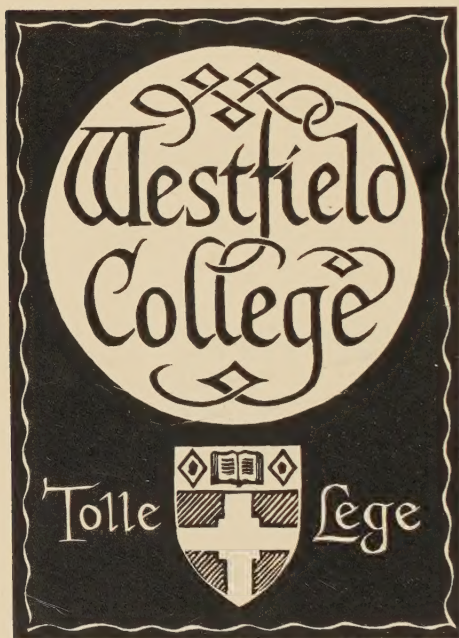




Author Herford, C. H.

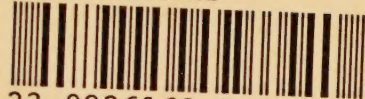
Class No. R PN 1271

Accession No. 7024





QMW LIBRARY



23 0926168 9


WITHDRAWN  
FROM STOCK  
QMW LIBRARY

DATE DUE FOR RETURN

18. APR 94  
25 MAY 1995  
2 MAY 1997

13 DEC 2006

29 MAY 2007



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2025

[https://archive.org/details/bwb\\_KU-602-064](https://archive.org/details/bwb_KU-602-064)



SHAKESPEARE'S TREATMENT  
OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE  
AND OTHER ESSAYS

07024  
23.4.49

## THE MERMAID SERIES

THE BEST PLAYS OF THE  
OLD DRAMATISTS. *Literal*  
*Reproductions of the Old Text*

WITH PHOTOGRAVURE FRONTISPIECE

Boards, **3/6** net; Cloth, **5/-** net each

THOMAS DEKKER, JOHN DRYDEN,  
BEN JONSON, THOMAS OTWAY.  
Etc.

*Send for a copy of the Prospectus of the*  
*Mermaid Series*

T. FISHER UNWIN LTD. LONDON

SHAKESPEARE'S  
TREATMENT OF  
LOVE & MARRIAGE  
AND OTHER ESSAYS  
*By* C. H. HERFORD

HONORARY PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERA-  
TURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

T. FISHER UNWIN LTD  
LONDON: ADELPHI TERRACE





*First published in 1921*

*(All rights reserved)*

TO  
MY STUDENTS,  
PAST AND PRESENT,  
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER  
1901—1921





## PREFACE

THE following essays, mainly concerned with famous and familiar names, are less heterogeneous, and it is hoped less hackneyed, than some of the titles may suggest. They are all occupied ultimately with some aspect of a single problem in what I would call the psychology of poetic experience, did not the phrase imply a scientific rigour of method hardly as yet achieved, in this region, by psychological science itself, and in any case beyond the reach of the present writer. How is the gift of imaginative creation affected by the presence in the same mind of one or other of the spiritual energies which have a different, even an alien, perhaps incompatible, aim or goal; or simply by a bias of ingrained ethical habitudes or ideals? What terms does poetry make with philosophy, or religion, or patriotism, or politics, or love, when one of these is urgent, also, in the mind of a poet? I say 'terms' advisedly, for nothing is more certain than that the outcome is determined by a process of give and take. Every complex experience involves a certain compromise among its disparate or contending factors; a compromise in great part, indeed, involuntary, resulting from the fact that, even in the least

integrated personalities, the field of consciousness is a continuous unity, into which no fresh element enters without modifying, and being itself modified by, the rest. In the class of cases with which we are here concerned the modification may be loss or gain, or both together. We think of Dante or Lucretius as great philosophical poets, and many people assume, because there are *longueurs* in the *Paradiso*, and tough blocks of versified mechanics in the *De Rerum Natura*, that these great poets would have produced better poems had they pursued poetry 'for its own sake.' What is certain is that, without the passion for truth, without the passionate desire to understand the universe, without, too, the missionary passion to save souls by communicating their own uplifting and fortifying faith, each would have been less occasionally tedious, doubtless, but also would have missed some of those heights in poetry which they in fact achieved. A chorus of critics denounce the 'didactic poem,' and clearly the impulse to instruct is more likely to act as slag than as fuel upon the flame of poetic creation. But the prophet is only the schoolmaster writ large, and *vates* is one of the oldest names of the poet. Matthew Arnold made fun of the educational theorizing in *The Excursion*, but no one better understood the grandeur of Wordsworth the prophet, and he and Goethe are doubtless chiefly accountable for the Arnoldian definition of poetry as 'criticism of life.'

Analogous problems are touched in the essays on Keats and on d'Annunzio. These two very dissimilar poets, both recently invested with topical

interest by the hazards of a centenary and of a political adventure, have this in common, that into the life of both came, at a certain moment, an experience of grandeur, which told decisively, though in utterly different ways, upon the scale and contents of their imaginative vision. Keats in 1818 for the first time looked upon 'grand mountains' (his own phrase); d'Annunzio, in the early nineties, was captivated by the Nietzschean revelation of the Superman. Upon Keats, the effect, complicated as we know, with other influences, was wholly astringent and bracing; it concurred with the strenuous art of Milton to wean him from the 'luxury' of his earlier song and inspire the colossal imaginings of *Hyperion*. Upon d'Annunzio the effect was less entirely happy. The fiery declamations of the Destroyer (as his Italian disciple called Nietzsche), who aspired to rear an ideally potent and perfect race upon the ruins of present-day humanity, enlarged his intellectual horizons and quickened his patriotic ambition, but also tinged his thinking and his action, whether as a poet or as a publicist, henceforth, with a megalomania hazardous for him in both capacities.

Shakespeare may seem to offer little foothold for this kind of study, or at least to illustrate aspects of it too familiar to be discussed. No one now imagines him a passionless artist, holding up the mirror to a world in which he had no further concern. He was in any case a devoted lover of his country, and patriotism contributed vitally to the making of one, not the least splendid or memorable, division of his drama. National pride has occasionally impaired the poetry of the English



Histories, though the vulgar Joan of Arc scenes in 1 *Henry VI* be no misdeed of his ; it has again and again caught the poet up to towering heights. But in some other, perhaps less obvious, ways Shakespeare's mentality, as we divine it, seems to stand in a like double relation to his poetry ; here tributary and creative, there, if not impairing its quality, limiting its scope. With all his apparent spontaneity, and the thousand unblotted lines which astonished his editors and offended Ben, he was hardly pure poet, hardly 'of imagination all compact' ; the man of 'soveran alchemy' had his share of the still untransmuted stuff. His poetry, compared with Spenser's or Shelley's, is in intimate touch with fact, far richer and deeper than theirs, but also nearer to the temper which is the negation of poetry. His glorious humanity is not without preferences and exclusions ; and these are largely of a kind which he shares with the respectable citizen rather than with the finer and rarer spirits. He has not Browning's taste for eccentric or exceptional types, his interest is not on the dangerous edge of things ; and if each of his great creations is in some sense unique, they are rich beyond all others in traits which make them seem our kin. He unmistakably prefers order to turmoil ; 'degree, priority and place' to the romance and heroics of revolution ; observance of custom, other things being the same, to the breach of it ; the normal to the irregular. His temperament was thus of a type which has affinities with some great and with some less estimable things : it is allied on the one side to the noble harmonies and symmetries of classical art, on the other to unreflecting

habit and dull routine. It is the aim of the opening essay to trace the effects of what I may then call Shakespeare's bias for *normality* in a single sphere of his art—his treatment of Love and Marriage. His ideal of love is a state in which passion and sense and intellect are united in happy balance, and we owe to it a series of creations of incomparable loveliness, from Rosalind and Portia to Imogen and Perdita. But it is plain that Shakespeare has sounded only a few notes of the gamut of love poetry. He gives us a few exquisite simple melodies; he rarely hints its complex music, the difficult harmonies extorted from dissonance and conflict. He rather conspicuously avoids, save for special dramatic purposes, irregular, illicit, or criminal passion. It is not merely accident or stage fashion that has prevented our having from Shakespeare more than occasional approximations to a Vittoria Corombona or a Francesca da Rimini, a Gretchen or a Rebekka West.

The fifth essay, finally, asks a question which may appear futile, or academic, but at least arises very naturally for the student in this field. Does the creative activity of poetry, so readily fed and fanned, or obstructed and impaired, by philosophical or religious preoccupation, itself react upon the poet's beliefs, his outlook upon the world, in any definable way? We may be inclined to reply, with the young Tennyson, that the poet stands apart from beliefs, 'holding no form of creed, but contemplating all'; or to object, on the contrary, that poets are the most sensitive of men, apt to be rather less than others exempt from subjection to the idols of their place and time. Certainly there

is no 'poet's creed.' But there may be a common bent or bias which poetic creation tends to impress upon creeds and convictions otherwise derived; and a survey of the modifications actually undergone by philosophies and theologies in the crucible of poetry suggests that this bent will be towards the faith which, in one guise or another, exalts the place and function of spirit in the universe, and in the last resort finds in spiritual energy the heart of reality.

\* \* \* \* \*

I desire to express my acknowledgments to the Council of the British Academy, for permission to reprint the fifth Essay; to the Keats' Memorial Committee, for permission to reprint the third; to the Council of the Rylands Library, for permission to reprint the second and fourth; and to the proprietors of *Edda* (Christiania) for permission to reprint the first. Most of them have been extensively revised and in part rewritten for the present volume. I am indebted to my colleagues, Prof. E. Gardner and Signor A. Valgimigli, for kindly reading the fourth essay. Neither is in any way responsible for the opinions expressed. The translations throughout the volume, unless the contrary is stated, are original.



# CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE . . . . .	7
I. SHAKESPEARE'S TREATMENT OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE . . . . .	17
II. THE POETRY OF LUCRETIOUS . . . . .	47
III. MOUNTAIN SCENERY IN KEATS . . . . .	83
IV. GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO . . . . .	101
V. IS THERE A POETIC VIEW OF THE WORLD? .	147



I

SHAKESPEARE'S TREATMENT  
OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE





# I

## SHAKESPEARE'S TREATMENT OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE

THE Shakesperean world is impressed, as a whole, with an unmistakable joy in healthy living. This tells habitually as a pervading spirit, a contagious temper, not as a creed put forward, or an example set up. It is as clear in the presentment of Falstaff or Iago, as of Horatio or Imogen. And nowhere is it clearer than in his handling of the relations between men and women. For here Shakespeare's preferences and repugnances are unusually transparent; what pleased him in the ways of lovers and wedded folks he drew again and again, and what repelled him he rarely and only for special reasons drew at all. Criminal love, of any kind, holds a quite subordinate place in his art; and, on the other hand, if ideal figures are to be found there, it is among his devoted, passionate, but arch and joyous women.

It is thus possible to lay down a Shakesperean *norm* or ideal type of love-relations. It is most distinct in the mature Comedies, where he is shaping his image of life with serene freedom; but also in the Tragedies, where a Portia or a Desdemona innocently perishes in the web of death. Even in

the Histories it occasionally asserts itself (as in Richard II's devoted queen, historically a mere child) against the stress of recorded fact. In the earlier Comedies it is approached through various stages of erratic or imperfect forms. And both in Comedy and Tragedy he makes use, though not largely, of other than the 'normal' love for definitely comic or tragic ends.

The present study will follow the plan thus indicated. The first section defines the 'norm.' The second describes the kinds of appeal and effect, in Comedy and Tragedy, to which the drama of 'normal' love lent itself. The third traces the gradual approach to the norm in the early Comedies. The fourth and fifth sections, finally, discuss the treatment, in Comedy and Tragedy, of Love-types other than the norm.

## I

The Shakesperean norm of love,<sup>1</sup> thus understood, may be described somewhat as follows. Love is a passion, kindling heart, brain, and senses alike in natural and happy proportions; ardent but not sensual, tender but not sentimental, pure but not ascetic, moral but not puritanic, joyous but not frivolous, mirthful and witty but not cynical. His lovers look forward to marriage as a matter of course, and they neither anticipate its rights nor turn their affections elsewhere. They commonly love at first sight and once for all. Love-relations which do not contemplate marriage occur rarely and in subordination to other dramatic

<sup>1</sup> The characteristics of this norm are well set forth by Wetz, *Shakespeare*, ch. v.

purposes. Tragedy like that of Gretchen does not attract him. Romeo's amour with Rosalind is a mere foil to his greater passion, Cassio's with Bianca merely a mesh in the network of Iago's intrigue; Claudio's with Juliet is the indispensable condition of the plot. The course of love rarely runs smooth; but rival suitors proposed by parents are quietly resisted or merrily abused, never, even by the gentlest, accepted. Crude young girls like Hermia, delicate-minded women like Desdemona and Imogen, the rapturous Juliet and the homely Anne Page, the discreet Silvia and the naïve Miranda, are all at one on this point. And they all carry the day. The dramatically powerful situations which arise from forced marriage—as when Ford's Penthea (*The Broken Heart*) or Corneille's Chimène (*Le Cid*) is torn by the conflict between love and honour—lie, like this conflict in general, outside Shakespeare's chosen field. And with this security of possession his loving women combine a capacity for mirth and jest not usual in the dramatic representation of passion. Rosalind is more intimately Shakesperean than Juliet.

Married life, as Shakespeare habitually represents it, is the counterpart, *mutatis mutandis*, of his representation of unmarried lovers. His husbands and wives have less of youthful abandon; they rarely speak of love, and still more rarely with lyric ardour, or coruscations of poetic wit. But they are no less true. The immense field of dramatic motives based upon infringements of marriage, so fertile in the hands of his successors, and in most other schools of drama, did not attract Shakespeare, and he touched it only occasionally and for par-



ticular purposes. Heroines like Fletcher's Evadne (*A Maid's Tragedy*), who marries a nominal husband to screen her guilty relations with the King, or Webster's Vittoria Corombona (*The White Devil*), who conspires with her lover to murder her husband, or Chapman's Tamyra (*Bussy d'Ambois*), whose husband kills her lover in her chamber; even Heywood's erring wife, whom her husband elects to 'kill with kindness,' are definitely un-Shakespearean.

## II

The norm of love lent itself both to comic and to tragic situation, but only within somewhat narrow limits. The richness, depth and constancy of the passion precluded a whole world of comic effects. It precluded the comedy of the coquette and the prude, of the affected gallant and the cynical roué, of the calf-lover and the doting husband; the comedy of the fantastic tricks played by love under the obsession of pride, self-interest, meticulous scruple, or superstition. Into this field Shakespeare made brilliant incursions, but it hardly engaged his rarest powers, and to large parts of it his 'universal' genius remained strange. We have only to recall, among a crowd of other examples, Moreto's Diana (*El Desden con el Desden*), Molière's Alceste and Célimène, Congreve's Millamant, in Shakespeare's century; or, in the modern novel, a long line of figures from Jane Austen to *The Egoist* and Ibsen's *Love's Comedy*—to recognize that Shakespeare, with all the beauty, wit and charm of his work, touched only the fringes of the Comedy of love.

The normal love, not being itself ridiculous, could thus yield material for the comic spirit only through some fact or situation external to it. It may be brought before us only in ludicrous parody. We laugh at the 'true love' of Pyramus and Thisbe in the 'tedious brief' play of the Athenian artisans, or at that of Phœbe and Silvius, because Shakespeare is chaffing the literary pastoral of his day. Hamlet's love, itself moving, even tragic, becomes a source of comedy in the solemn analysis of Polonius. Or again, the source of fun lies in the wit and humour of the lovers themselves. Some of them, like Rosalind and Beatrice, virtually create and sustain the wit-fraught atmosphere of the play single-handed. But Shakespeare habitually heightens this source of fun by some piquancy of situation—almost always one arising from delusion, particularly through confusion of identity. It is a mark of the easy-going habits of his art in comedy that he never threw aside this rather elementary device, though subjecting it, no doubt, to successive refinements which become palpable enough when we pass from the *Two Gentlemen* to *Cymbeline*. But his genius made perennially delightful even the crude forms of confusion which create grotesque infatuations like those of Titania, Malvolio, Phœbe, Olivia. More refined, and yet more delightful, are the confusions which bring true and destined lovers together, like the arch make-believe courtship with which Rosalind's wit amuses and consoles her womanhood, and that other which liberates the natural congeniality of Beatrice and Benedict from their 'merry war.' In cases like

these, Shakespeare's humour has the richer and finer effluence which derives from a hidden ground of passion or tears. Rosalind's wit is that of a woman many fathoms deep in love; Beatrice's ears tingle with remorse at the tale of Benedick's secret attachment; Viola's gallant bravado to Olivia conceals her own unspoken maiden love. And Portia crowns her home-coming to her husband and her splendid service to his friend with the madcap jest of the rings. Such jesting is in Shakespeare a part of the language of love; and like its serious or lyrical speech, is addressed with predilection to love's object.

Again, the normal love offered in itself equally little promise of tragedy. No deformed or morbid passion, but the healthy and natural self-fulfilment of man and woman, calling heart and wit and senses alike into vigorous play, it provided equally little hold for the criminal erotics in which most of Shakespeare's contemporaries sought the tragic thrill, and for the bitter disenchantment and emotional decay which generate the subtle tragedy of *Anna Karénina* or *Modern Love*. Tragic these healthy lovers of themselves will never become; they have to be led into the realm of pity and fear, as into that of laughter and mirth, by the incitement or the onthrust of alien forces. Here, too, Shakespeare's habitual instrument is delusion; only now it is not the delusion which deftly entangles and pleasantly infatuates, but that which horribly perplexes and rends apart. The blindness of Claudio, of Othello, of Posthumus, of Leontes, is provoked by circumstances of very various cogency, but in each case it wrecks a love relation

in which we are allowed to see no flaw. The situation of innocent, slandered, heart-stricken womanhood clearly appealed strongly to him, and against his wont he repeated it again and again. Even after leaving the stage, he was allured by the likeness of the story of Henry VIII's slandered queen to his Hermione, to reopen the magic 'book' he had 'drowned.' He was no sentimentalist; his pathos is never morbid; but it is in imagining souls of texture fine and pure enough to be wrought upon to the most piteous extreme by slander from the man they love, that Shakespeare found most of his loveliest and most authentically Shakespearean characters of women. Hermione and Hero, Desdemona and Imogen, are to his graver art what Rosalind and Beatrice and Portia are to his comedy.

But while the tragic issue is directly provoked by the alien intervention, it is clear that almost all its tragic quality springs, not from the operations of Iachimo or Iago, but from the wonderful presentment of the love they wreck. Shakespeare's supreme command of pity springs from his exalted faith in love. The poet of the Sonnets is implicit in the poet of *Othello*. And the dramas themselves abound in lyric outbursts, often hardly called for by the situation, in which his ideal of wedded love is uttered with the poignant insight of one who was probably far from having achieved or observed it himself. One need but think of France's reply to Burgundy (*King Lear*, I, i. 241):

Love's not love  
When it is mingled with regards that stand  
Aloof from the entire point.



## 24 SHAKESPEARE'S TREATMENT

Or of Imogen, blind to all but the path of light  
and air that divides her from Milford Haven :

I see before me, man ; nor here, nor here,  
Nor what ensues, but have a fog in them,  
That I cannot look through.

Even Adriana, in the *Comedy of Errors*, expresses the unity of married love with an intensity which we expect neither from this bustling *bourgeoise* nor in this early play :

For know, my love, as easy mayst thou fall  
A drop of water in the breaking gulf  
And take unmingled thence that drop again  
Without addition or diminishing,  
As take from me thyself and not me too ; (II, ii. 127.)

an utterance which in its simple pathos anticipates the agonized cry of Othello—the most thrilling expression in Shakespeare of the meaning of wedded unity :

But there, where I have garnered up my heart,  
Where either I must live, or bear no life,  
The fountain from the which my current runs,  
Or else dries up : to be discarded thence !

The husband in these cases, it is true, neither forgives nor condones, and Shakespeare (unlike Heywood) gives no hint that he would have dissented from the traditional ethics on which Othello and Posthumus and Leontes acted, had their wives in fact been guilty. The wives, on the other hand, encounter the husband's unjust suspicions, or brutal slanders, without a thought of revenge or reprisal. Desdemona, Imogen,



Hermione, alike beautifully fulfil the ideal of love presented in the great sonnet :

Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.

In one drama only did he represent ideal love brought to a tragic doom without a hint of inner severance. The wedded unity of Romeo and Juliet is absolute from their first meeting to their last embrace ; it encounters only the blind onset of outer and irrelevant events ; nothing touches their rapturous faith in one another. This earliest of the authentic tragedies thus represents, in comparison with its successors, only an elementary order of tragic experience ; set beside *Othello*, it appears to be not a tragedy of love, but love's triumphal hymn. Yet it is only in this sense immature. If Shakespeare had not yet fathomed the depths of human misery, he understood completely the exaltation of passion, and *Romeo and Juliet*, though it gives few glimpses beyond the horizons of his early world, remains the consummate flower of his poetry of ideal love.

### III

The beauty and insight of Shakespeare's finest portrayals of the comedy and the tragedy of love were not reached at once. His conception of love itself was still, at the opening of his career, relatively slight and superficial ; his mastery of technique was equally incomplete. The early plays accordingly abound with scenes and situations

where from either cause or both the dramatic treatment of love is not yet in the full sense Shakesperean. It will suffice in this sketch to specify two types of each.

The young Shakespeare, as is well known, showed a marked leaning to two apparently incongruous kinds of dramatic device—paradox and symmetry. In the riotous consciousness of power he loved to take up the challenge of outrageous situations, to set himself dramaturgical problems, which he solves by compelling us to admit that the impossible might have happened in the way he shows. A shrew to be ‘tamed’ into a model wife. A widow following her murdered father’s coffin, to be wooed, there and then, and won, by his murderer. A girl of humble birth, in love with a young noble who scorns her, to set herself, notwithstanding, to win him, and to succeed. Paradoxical feats like these were foreign to the profound normality—under whatever romantic disguise—of Shakespeare’s mature art. Richard and Petruchio and Helen carry into the problems of love-making the enterprising audacity of the young Shakespeare in the problems of art. But the audacity of the young Shakespeare showed itself in another way. His so-called taste for ‘symmetry’ had nothing in common with the classical canons of balance and order. It was nearer akin to the boyish humour of mimicry. If he found a pair of indistinguishable twins producing amusing confusion in a Roman play, he capped them with a second pair, to produce confusion worse confounded in the English *Comedy of Errors*. And so with love. Navarre (in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*) and his

three lords, like the four horses of an antique quadriga, go through the same adventure side by side. All four have forsworn the sight of women; all four fall in love, not promiscuously but in order of rank, with the French princess and her ladies, whose numbers, by good fortune, precisely go round.

But love itself is not, as yet, drawn with any power. Berowne's magnificent account of its attributes and effects (IV, iii., mainly re-written in 1597) is not borne out by any representation of it in the play. The 'taffeta phrases' and 'silken terms precise,' the pointed sallies and punning repartees, full of a hard crackling gaiety, neither express passion nor suggest, like the joyous quips of the later *Rosalind*, that passion is lurking behind. We are spectators of a rather protracted flirtation, a 'way of love' which was to occupy a minimal place in his later drama. Armado's dramatically unimportant seduction of Jaquenetta is likewise a symptom of his 'apprentice' phase.

Equally immature is the representation of fickle love in the *Two Gentlemen*. Proteus is Shakespeare's only essay in the Don Juan type, but it falls far short in psychological and dramatic force of his portrait of the faithful Julia. Proteus's speeches are often rhetorical analyses of his situation rather than dramatic expressions of it. His threat to outrage Sylvia (V, iv. 58) is, as he naively declares, 'gainst the nature of love,' and it clashed no less violently with Shakespeare's rendering of the passion elsewhere. Even the apparent fickleness produced by delusion flourishes only in the magical world of the young Shakespeare's *Midsummer Dream*.

The inconstancy of the Athenian lovers attests only the potency of the faery juice. No doubt Shakespeare's denouements, even in some of the maturest comedies, show his lovers accepting with a singular facility a fate in love other than that they had chosen. Olivia accepts Sebastian in default of Viola, and the Duke Viola when Olivia is out of the question. Still less defensible artistically is Isabel's renunciation of the convent to marry the Duke. But these acquiescences, even if they were not touched with the frequent perfunctoriness of Shakespeare's finales, are not to be classed with deliberate inconstancy.

A second mark of unripeness in the conception of love as extravagant magnanimity. This, like other kinds of unnatural virtue, was a part of the heritage from mediæval romance, fortified with Roman legend. The antique exaltation of friendship concurred with the Germanic absoluteness of faithful devotion, and for the mediæval mind the most convincing way of attesting this was by the surrender of a mistress. In the tenth book of the *Decamerone* Boccaccio collects the most admired examples of 'things done generously and magnificently,' chiefly in matters of love; one of them is the tale of Tito and Gisippo (*Decamerone*, X, 8), where, Tito having fallen in love with his friend's bride, Gisippo 'generously' resigns to him all but the name of husband. The story, quoted in Sir T. Elyot's *Governour* (1531), was well known in Elizabethan England, and fell in with the fantastical world of Fletcher's Romanticism. But the humanity and veracity of the mature Shakespeare rejected these extravagances as the cognate



genius of the mature Chaucer had done before him. Chaucer lived to mock at the legendary magnanimity of Griselda, so devoutly related in the *Clerkes Tale*; and it was only the young Shakespeare who could have made Valentine's astounding offer, in the *Two Gentlemen*, to resign 'all his rights' in his bride to the 'friend' from whose offer of violence he has only a moment before rescued her (V, vi. 83).<sup>1</sup>

A second variety of extravagant magnanimity was the recurring situation of the girl, who, deserted by her lover, follows him in disguise, takes service as his page, and in that capacity is employed by him to further his suit to a new mistress. This motive was of the purest romantic lineage; having first won vogue in Europe through Montemayor's *Diana* (1558, trans. 1588), and in England by Sidney's *Arcadia* (1581, publ. 1590). On the London stage it profited by the special piquancy attaching to the rôles of girls in masculine disguise when the actors were boys, and its blend of audacious adventure and devoted self-sacrifice gave the Elizabethan auditor precisely the kind of composite thrill he loved.

For some forms of sex-confusion Shakespeare throughout his career retained an unmistakable liking. But the finer instincts of his ripening art

<sup>1</sup> The conflict of friendship with love was in general treated in England with a livelier sense of the power of love than in Italy. Boccaccio's Palemone and Arcita, rivals for the hand of Emilia, courteously debate their claims (*Teseide*, V, 36, 39 f.); Chaucer makes them fight in grim earnest. Spenser in the spirit of the Renaissance makes friendship an ideal virtue, but exposes it to more legitimate trials, as where the Squire of low degree repels the proffered favours of his friend's bride. (*Faerie Queen*, iv. 9, 2.)



gradually restricted its scope. Viola, in the original story (Bandello, II, 36) follows a faithless lover; in *Twelfth Night*, wrecked on the Illyrian coast, she disguises herself merely for safety, takes service with the Duke as a complete stranger, and only subsequently falls in love with him. The change indicates with precision Shakespeare's attitude at this date (c. 1600) to this type of situation. He was still quite ready to exploit the rather elementary comedy arising out of sex-confusion—to paint with gusto Viola's embarrassments as the object of Olivia's passion and Sir Andrew's challenge, or the brilliant pranks of Rosalind in a like position. But he would not now approach these situations by the romantic avenue of a love-sick woman's pursuit. In his latest plays he shows disrelish even for the delightful fun evolved from sex-confusion in *Twelfth Night* and *As you like it*. The adventures of Imogen in disguise are purely pathetic. Pisanio indeed proposes, and Imogen agrees, to follow her husband to Italy in disguise; but this opening is significantly not followed up. (*Cymbeline*, III, iv. 150 f.)

But in the *Two Gentlemen*, the entire motive without curtailment or qualification is presented in the adventures of Julia. Abandoned by Proteus, she follows him in disguise, takes service as his page, and is employed as go-between in his new courtship of Silvia. To the young Shakespeare the situation was still wholly congenial, and he availed himself of its opportunities of pathos without reserve, though with incomplete power. His riper technique, fortified probably by a closer acquaintance with the spirited and high-bred womanhood

of the Portias and Rosalinds of his time, withdrew his interest, perhaps his belief, from the risky psychology of Julia's self-assertion and self-abnegation. Like other strained situations suggested by 'golden tongued romance,' it fell away before the consolidated experience, the genial worldliness, the poetized normality, of his riper art.

The case of another devoted pursuer of an unwilling man is more complicated, and calls for closer examination. *All's Well That Ends Well* has already been referred to as an example of the paradox-plotting congenial to the young Shakespeare. But Helena's passion and her sacrifices for the man whose love she seeks ally her also with the Julia type. Yet internal evidence leaves no doubt that this play, though originally written, and therefore planned, in the early nineties, was revised by Shakespeare at a date not far remote from that of Hamlet. If the paradox-subject was the apprentice's eager choice, the artist at the height of his power did not reject its challenge. In the original story (*Decamerone*, III, 9) the flavour of paradox was even more pronounced. Like the other tales of the Third Day, it describes one who *alcuna cosa molto da lui desiderata con industria acquistasse*. Giletta of Narbonne succeeds in effect by sheer audacity and enterprise; and Boccaccio's readers doubtless enjoyed this inversion of the usual rôles, where a masterful girl captures a reluctant man. Shakespeare's earlier version was probably the lost *Love's Labour's Won* mentioned by Meres, and the title emphasizes the element of resolute and unhesitating pursuit which marks the

original, and was probably more pronounced in the earlier than in the revised play.

For it is plain that precisely the resolute pursuit of a resisting man was uncongenial to Shakespeare's riper art, because unnatural in the type of high-bred and refined womanhood whose ways in love reflected his ideal of healthy love-making. Helena, as the heroine and predominant figure of the play, had to be of the sisterhood of Portia and Rosalind and Beatrice and Viola. But if the plot forbade this? And clearly, the most hazardous incident of all (the substitution of Helen for Diana) could not be eliminated without breaking up the plot altogether. Why then take up the old play at all? Plainly there must have been in the fundamental theme something which Shakespeare was unwilling to lose as well as something that he would have wished away. This something that attracted him was evidently Helen's clear-sighted resolution in itself; in this she is, in fact, a true sister of Portia and Rosalind, though her seriousness is not, like theirs, irradiated with laughter. Could she be visibly endowed with this grace of clear sight and will, yet at the same time be rather drawn on by circumstances to the final conquest of Bertram than herself the active agent in it? Somewhat thus must the problem have presented itself to Shakespeare. Did he completely solve it? I think not. But we can to some extent follow his procedure.

Strength and delicacy are from the first blended in Helen. Her famous lines (I, i. 231):

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie  
Which we ascribe to heaven.

strike the keynote of her resolute temper. Yet her love, a maiden's idolatry, is content without possession; with her, 'Dian' is 'both herself and love' (I, iii. 218). If she forms plans for showing her merit and thus commending herself in Bertram's eyes, she takes no step herself; it is the Countess who, having discovered her love, welcomes her prospective daughter-in-law and sends her with all proper convoy to court to 'cure the king.' Her choosing of Bertram (II, iii. 109) is an offer of life-long service, not the appropriation of a well-won prize. And when Bertram bluntly declares that he 'cannot love her nor will strive to do it,' she proposes, turning to the king, to withdraw her whole claim:

That you are well restored, my lord, I'm glad;  
Let the rest go.

The crucial situation, however, for her (and for Shakespeare) begins only with Bertram's definite departure, and scornful intimation of the conditions on which he will be her husband. Giletta, on receiving the corresponding message, had made up her mind at once what to do; had arranged her affairs and set out on the *soi-disant* pilgrimage to Florence, where Beltramo she knows will be found. Helena's procedure is less clear. Two distinct courses were open to her. She might, like Giletta, make direct for Bertram at Florence, under the pretext of going on a pilgrimage. Or she might finally surrender the pursuit of a husband who had decisively shown he did not love her, as she had already proposed to do when he had only declared that he did not. The second was un-



questionably more in keeping with Helen's character. But the first was more in keeping with the plot. It might well be that Shakespeare's Helen would hesitate between the two. But it is in any case probable that Shakespeare hesitated, and that the marks of his hesitation have not been effaced from the text.

On reading Bertram's letter she is, like Imogen when she reads Posthumus's, for the moment overwhelmed. 'This is a dreadful sentence.' She hardly speaks, and gives no hint to the Countess of her thoughts. But when she is alone she breaks out in the great passionate monologue of renunciation (III, ii. 102 f.) . . .

No, come thou home, Rousillon,  
Whence honour but of danger wins a scar,  
As oft it loses all: I will be gone;  
My being here it is that holds thee hence:  
Shall I stay here to do't? no, no, although  
The air of paradise did fan the house,  
And angels office'd all: I will be gone. . . .

'This can only imply, since she is alone, that she sincerely proposes to give up all claim to her nominal husband.

Nevertheless, in Scene iv., the Countess is seen reading a letter from Helen which declares that she has gone as a pilgrim to Saint Jaques, in Florence. She begs the Countess, it is true, to summon Bertram home to live there in peace while she in the far land does penance for her 'ambitious love.' Was this a subterfuge, like Giletta's, or was it her sincere intention as we should infer from the previous monologue? If it is the first, Helena comes nearer to the crafty duplicity of Giletta than anywhere else in the play, and this towards



the Countess who has just indignantly renounced her stubborn son, and taken Helena to her heart as her sole child (III, ii. 71). But if it is the second, we cannot but ask why then, if Helena means *bona fide* to avoid Bertram and leave him free, she chooses for her pilgrimage precisely the one place in the world in which she knows he will be found? And this awkward question remains unanswered, notwithstanding the evident effort to allow us to believe in Helena's innocent good faith. Giletta, on arriving at Florence, takes up her abode at an inn, 'eager to hear news of her lord.' Helena arrives, apparently concerned only to learn the way to St. Jacques, and where the pilgrims bound thither found lodging. Then Bertram is mentioned; she learns that he is known, and has made advances to Diana; presently he passes by, and now at length Helen deliberately and unhesitatingly takes measures to fulfil his 'impossible' conditions.

Helena's conduct appears, then, to fluctuate, without clear explanation, between resolute pursuit and dignified renunciation.

There can be no doubt that the former type of procedure represents the earlier, the latter the riper, mind of Shakespeare, in the treatment of love. The letter to the Countess, of III, iv., is, like all his verse-letters, early work; the great preceding monologue is in the richly imaginative phrase and daringly yet harmoniously moulded verse of the Hamlet period. He set out to fit a character based upon a nobler type of love into a plot based upon a grosser; and even he could not effect this without some straining of the stuff, and here and there a palpable rent.

## IV

What I have called the norm of love must thus rank high among the determining forces of his mature drama. Obscured and disguised at the outset by crude conceptions and immature technique, it gradually grew clear, and provided the background of passion, faith, and truth out of which, aided by misunderstandings, pleasant or grave, his most delightful comedy and his most poignant tragedy were evolved. And other types of love—whether they made for comedy or for tragedy, held a relatively slight place in his work. In particular he concerns himself only in a quite exceptional or incidental way either with the high comedy of love or with guilty passion.

His comedy of love outside the norm for the most part resembles burlesque. In other words, the 'ways of love' which he treats as comic material are not plausible or subtle approximations to romantic passion, but ludicrously absurd counterfeits of it. The fun is brilliant, but it does not strike deep; it provokes the loud laugh rather than the 'slim feasting smile.' It commonly springs from some grotesque infatuation; as when, in Bottom and Titania, human grossness and fairy fantasticality are brought together for the eternal joy of gods and men. Ridicule of such infatuations was soon to find its peculiar home in the Humour comedy of the later nineties, in the prosaic satirical air of which the romantic or normal love had no place at all. It is hardly an accident that the plays in which this Shakesperean comedy of grotesque

infatuation in love runs riot were produced when the Humour comedy was at the height of its vogue, or that they bear clear traces of its influence. *Twelfth Night* is far from being as a whole a Comedy of Humours. Viola's maiden passion is touched with a charm wholly alien to it. The Duke, with his opal and taffeta mind, a self-pleasing artist in emotion, who feeds his languid passion on music, and does his wooing by proxy, is perhaps Shakespeare's only serious study of love as a humour. Of still more laughable futility is the love-making of Malvolio, with his smiles and yellow stockings, and Sir Andrew, who gets no further than learning an assortment of fine words for an interview that never comes off—a comic counterpart to Iago's miserable dupe, Roderigo. *The Merry Wives* also shows the influence of the Humour comedy. Slender is a true 'country-gull,' nowhere more obviously than in his wooing, or preparations to woo, sweet Anne Page. The adventures of Falstaff in pursuit of Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page are brilliantly executed examples of a kind of comic effect which Shakespeare's riper art elsewhere disdained. Officially required to represent 'Falstaff in love,' he turned the laugh against the lover by representing his ill-luck in pursuing the only 'way of love' he knew.

## V

Finally, as Shakespeare recognized for purposes of comedy certain types of love-making alien to the ideal norm, so too, more rarely, for the purposes of tragedy. Ideal love, as has been seen, occurs constantly in the tragedies even where it does not

directly affect or participate in the tragic issues; as with France and Cordelia, Brutus and Portia, Richard II and his queen, Coriolanus and Virgilia. But the more penetrating sense of evil which becomes apparent in his tragic period contributed to draw more prominently into the sphere of his art the disastrous aspects of the relations between men and women. That he refrained from exploiting in drama the more sinister forms of passion, we have seen. But in some of his ripest and greatest work he drew love with implications, and under conditions, which sharply mark it off from the 'marriage of true minds.' It is unstable, or lawless, or grounded on illusion; and thus not merely succumbs easily to assault from without, but directly breeds and fosters tragic ruin within. Even the union of Othello and Desdemona, in every other respect a 'marriage of true minds' which reaches for a moment (ii. 1) incomparable intensity and beauty, is rendered fatally precarious by their ignorance of each other.

Love, like everything else which grows in Hamlet's Denmark, is touched with insidious disease. Ophelia is wonderfully imagined in keeping with the tragic atmosphere, an exquisite but fragile flower of the unweeded garden where evil things run to seed and good things wither. And her love, wholly un-Shakesperean as it is, and therefore irritating to many readers, bears within it the seed of tragedy both for Hamlet and herself. It is 'a power girt round with weakness.' She never falters in faithful devotion to him; but the 'sweet bells,' her father has told her, are 'jangled,' and she consents both to be the instru-



ment of the king and Polonius's 'lawful espial' (which may, please heaven, restore him), and to deny his access and return his gifts. She stands alone among Shakesperean heroines in renouncing her love at a father's bidding. We seem to approach for once the heroic renunciations of love in the name of principle or country which impress us in Corneille and Racine—in *Polyeucte* or *Bérénice*. But no halo of sublime self-sacrifice surrounds Ophelia's renunciation, for her or for us. It is merely a piteous surrender, which breaks her heart, overthrows her delicately poised reason, and removes one of the last supports of Hamlet's trust in goodness.

On the other hand, Shakespeare occasionally found his tragic love in violent and lawless passion. We need not dwell on episodic incidents like the rivalry in the love of Edmund which crowns and closes the criminal careers of Goneril and Regan. In this case there was little scope for the undoing of soul which is the habitual theme of Shakesperean tragedy. But in *Measure for Measure* an inrush of sensual passion instantly shatters the imposing but loosely built edifice of Angelo's morality, and though the play was meant for comedy, and the tragic point is thus (rather clumsily) blunted or broken off, the spiritual undoing of him is discernible enough. Without a thought of resistance he proceeds to act out the whole merciless catalogue of vices which the poet of sonnet cxxix saw attending upon lust.<sup>1</sup> At the same time it is clear that Isabel, with her cold austerity, is an

<sup>1</sup> 'Perjured, murderous, . . . savage, extreme . . . rude, cruel, not to trust.'



even greater anomaly among Shakespeare's women. Their purity is not that of a negative abstinence, but of whole-hearted devotion to the man they love.

In *Cressida* he drew a kind of tragic love as lawless as *Angelo's* and as sensual, but insidious and seductive instead of violent. Compared with the profligate women of Restoration Comedy she has a certain girlish air of grace and innocence. If she betrays *Troilus* for *Diomedes* it is with a sigh and a half wistful glance back at the deserted lover: '*Troilus, farewell! one eye yet looks on thee*' (V, ii. 107). Though classed by the Folio editors—hesitatingly it would seem—with the Tragedies, this play seems to set at nought the whole scheme of Shakesperean tragedy. Neither *Troilus* nor *Cressida* has the grandeur without which ruin is not sublime; and their love has not the heroic intensity of those (like Heine's *Asra*) *welche sterben wenn sie lieben*. The only imposing figures are those of the great captains of the Greek and Trojan camps, who are but slightly concerned with their love. Nevertheless, the whole effect of the play is tragic, or falls short of tragedy only because the gloom is more unrelieved. There are no colossal disasters, plots, crimes, or suffering, nor yet the stormy splendour which agony beats out of the souls of *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Antony*, or *Lear*, and which leaves us at the close rather exultant than depressed. This tragedy is purely depressing because it strikes less deep; the harms do not rend and shatter, but secretly undermine and insidiously frustrate. *Cressida* is a symbol of the love which may kindle valour for a moment, but in the end saps heroism and romance at once, and which

strikes the magnificent champions of Homeric story themselves with a futility more tragic than death, the futility hinted savagely in the Horatian *Troiani cunus teterrima belli Causa*, and superbly in Faustus's great apologue to 'the face that launched the thousand ships.'

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, on the other hand, a type of love not in its origin loftier or purer than that of Troilus and Cressida is seen dominating two souls of magnificent compass and daemonic force. Antony is held by his serpent of old Nile in the grip of a passion which insolently tramples on moral and institutional bonds, private and public alike; which brings the lovers to ruin and to death; and which yet invests their fall with a splendour beside which the triumph of their conqueror appears cold and mean. There is no conflict, no weighing of love and empire, as great alternatives, against each other, in the manner of Corneille; nor does Shakespeare take sides with either; he neither reprobates Antony, like Plutarch, for sacrificing duty to love, nor glorifies him, like the author of the Restoration drama, *All for Love, or the World Well Lost*; still less does he seek to strike a balance between these views. He is no ethical theorist trying exactly to measure right or wrong, but a great poet whose comprehensive soul had room, together, for many kinds of excellence incompatible in the experience of ordinary men. That Antony's passion for Cleopatra not only ruins his colossal power in the state but saps his mental and moral strength is made as mercilessly clear in Shakespeare as in Plutarch. He is 'the noble ruin of her magic.' But it is

equally clear that this passion enlarges and enriches his emotional life; in a sense other than that intended by the sober Enobarbus,

A diminution in our captain's brain  
Restores his heart; (III, xiii, 198)

and enlarged feeling opens up new regions of imagination and lifts him to unapproached heights of poetry, as in the unarming-scene with Eros (IV, xiv.) and the farewell speeches to Cleopatra ('I am dying, Egypt, dying,' IV, xv.). And Cleopatra too, in the 'infinite variety' of her moods, has momentary flickerings of genuine devotion of which she was before incapable. Momentary only, it is true; the egoist, the actress, the coquette, are only fitfully overcome; in her dying speech itself the accent of them all is heard. The 'baser elements' are not expelled, but the nobler 'fire and air' to which she dreams that she is resolved, gleam for a fitful instant in her cry 'Husband, I come,' to yield a moment later to jealous alarm lest ~~Lear~~ *Lear* should have Antony's kiss, and vindictive satisfaction at having outwitted Cæsar.

Shakespeare's poetry takes account of so vast a number of other things, of so many other ways of living and aspects of life, that we hardly think even of the author of *Romeo and Juliet* as in any special sense the poet of Love. Nor is he, if we mean by this that he thinks or speaks of Love in the transcendent way of Dante, or Lucretius, or Spenser, or Shelley. Love with them is part of the vital frame of the universe. Lucretius (in spite of his atomist creed) saw it pervading 'all

that moves below the gliding stars, the sea and its ships, the earth and its flocks and flowers.' Dante saw it as the force which not only draws men and women together, but 'moves the Sun and the other stars.' Spenser saw it as 'the Lord of all the world by right, that rules all creatures by his powerful saw.' Shelley saw it as the sustaining force blindly woven through the web of Being. For such heights of poetic metaphysic we do not look in Shakespeare. He is one of the greatest of poets, and his poetry has less almost than any other the semblance of myth and dream; its staple is the humanity we know, its basis the ground we tread; what we call the prose world, far from being excluded, is genially taken in. And precisely where he is greatest, in the sublime ruin of the tragedies, love between the sexes has on the whole a subordinate place, and is there most often fraught, as we have seen, with disaster and frustration. So it seemed to Keats when he turned from 'golden-tongued Romance' to 'burn through' the strife of 'damnation with impassioned clay' in *King Lear*. Shakespeare certainly did not, so far as we can judge, regard sexual love (like some moderns) as either the clue to human life or as in any way related to the structure of the universe. But if, instead of these abstract questions, we ask whether any poet has united in a like degree veracious appreciation of love in its existing conditions with apprehension of all its ideal possibilities, we shall not dispute Shakespeare's place among the foremost of the poets of love.





## II

### THE POETRY OF LUCRETIVS



## II

### THE POETRY OF LUCRETIVS

‘Lucretius stands alone in the controversial force and energy with which the genius of negation inspires him, and transforms into sublime reasons for firm act, so long as living breath is ours, the thought that the life of a man is no more than the dream of a shadow.’—LORD MORLEY’S *Recollections*.

## I

THERE was a time when the title of this essay would have been received as a paradox, if not as a contradiction in terms. Lessing, as is well known, declared roundly that Lucretius was ‘a versifier, not a poet,’ and Lessing is one of the greatest of European critics. It is easy, indeed, to explain in part his trenchant condemnation. It reflects his implicit acceptance of Aristotle’s *Poetics*—which he said was for him as absolutely valid as Euclid, and therefore of Aristotle’s doctrine that poetry is imitation of human action. Lessing’s insistence on this doctrine was extraordinarily salutary in his day, and definitely lowered the status of the dubious kinds known as descriptive, allegorical, satirical, and didactic poetry, in a century too much given to them all. That

phrase of his about the imitation of human action marked out a correct, well-defined, and safe channel for the stream of poetry to pursue, and some of the slender poetic rills of his generation improved their chance of survival by falling into it and flowing between its banks. But Lessing did not reckon with the power of poetic genius to force its own way to the sea through no matter how tangled and tortuous a river-bed,—nay, to capture from the very obstructions it overcomes new splendours of foam and rainbow unknown perhaps to the well-regulated stream. In plain language, he did not reckon with the fact that a *prima facie* inferior form, such as satire or didactic, may not only have its inferiority outweighed by compensating beauties, but may actually elicit and provoke beauties not otherwise to be had, and thus become not an obstacle, but an instrument of poetry. Nor did he foresee that such a recovery of poetic genius, such an effacement of the old boundaries, such a withdrawal of the old taboos, was to come with the following century, nay, was actually impending when he wrote. Goethe, who read the *Laokoon* entranced, as a young student at Leipzig, honoured its teaching very much on this side of idolatry when he came to maturity. As a devoted investigator of Nature, who divined the inner continuity of the flower and the leaf with the same penetrating intuition which read the continuity of a man, or of a historic city, in all the phases of their growth, Goethe was not likely to confine poetry within the bounds either of humanity or of the drums and trappings, the violence, passion, and sudden death, for which human action in poetic criticism

has too commonly stood. He himself wrote a poem of noble beauty on the *Metamorphosis of Plants* (1797)—a poem which suffices to show that it is possible to be poetically right while merely unfolding the inner truth of things in perfectly adequate speech.<sup>1</sup> We cannot wonder, then, that Lucretius and the poem *On the Nature of Things* excited in the greatest of German poets the liveliest interest and admiration. On the score of subject alone he eagerly welcomed the great example of Lucretius. But he saw that Lucretius had supreme gifts as a poet, which would have given distinction to whatever he wrote, and which, far from being balked by the subject of his choice, found in it peculiarly large scope and play. ‘What sets out Lucretius so high,’ he wrote (1821) to his friend v. Knebel, author of the first German translation, ‘what sets him so high and assures him eternal renown, is a lofty faculty of sensuous intuition, which enables him to describe with power; in addition, he disposes of a powerful imagination, which enables him to pursue what he has seen beyond the reach of sense into the invisible depths of Nature and her most mysterious recesses.’<sup>2</sup> But while Goethe thus led the way in endorsing without reserve the Lucretian conception of what the field of poetry might legitimately include, he contributed to the discussion nothing, so far as I

<sup>1</sup> Goethe probably never heard of a less fortunate adventure in that kind by his English contemporary, Dr. Erasmus Darwin, the *Loves of the Plants*, which had then been famous in England for ten years; a poem which suffices to show that it is possible to exploit in the description of natural processes all the figures and personifications of poetry, and yet to go egregiously wrong.

<sup>2</sup> To Knebel, 14 February 1821.



know, so illuminating or so profound as the great saying of Wordsworth : ' poetry is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science.' For Wordsworth here sweeps peremptorily away the boundary marks set up, for better or worse, by ancient criticism—he knows nothing of a poetry purely of man or purely of action : he finds the *differentia* of poetry not in any particular choice of subject out of the field of real things, but in the *impassioned* handling of them whencesoever drawn, and therefore including the impassioned handling of reality as such, or, in the Lucretian phrase, of *the nature of things*.

What did he mean by *impassioned* ? Something more, certainly, than the enthusiasm of a writer possessed with his theme, or even of one eager, as Lucretius was, to effect by its means a glorious purgation in the clotted soul of a friend. We come nearer when we recall the profound emotion stirred in Wordsworth by ' earth's tears and mirth, her humblest mirth and tears,' or the thought, ' too deep for tears,' given him by the lowliest flower of the field. Such passion as this is not easily analysed, but it implies something that we may call participation on the one side and response on the other. The poet finds himself in Nature, finds there something that answers to spiritual needs of his own. The measure of the poet's mind will be the measure of the value of the response he receives. A small poet will people Nature with fantastic shapes which reflect nothing but his capricious fancy or his self-centred desires. That is not finding a response in Nature, but putting one into her mouth ; a procedure like that of the

bustling conversationalist who, instead of listening to your explanation, cuts it short with a 'You mean to say'—whatever it suits him to suppose. But the poet of finer genius will neither seek nor be satisfied with such hollow response as this. If he finds himself in Nature, it will not be his shallow fancies or passing regrets that he finds, but his furthest reach, and loftiest appetency of soul. He will not properly be said to 'subdue things to the mind,' as Bacon declared it to be the characteristic aim of poetry to do, instead of, like philosophy, subduing the mind to things. But he will feel after analogies to mind in the universe of things which mind contemplates and interprets.

Such an analogy, for instance, is the sense of *continuity* underlying the changing show of the material world, corresponding to the continuity of our own self-consciousness through the perpetual variations of our soul states. The doctrine of a permanent substance persisting through the multiplicity of Nature, and giving birth to all its passing modes, belongs as much to poetry as to philosophy, and owes as much to impassioned intuition as to a priori thought. Under the name of the *One and the Many* the problem of Change and Permanence perplexed and fascinated every department of Greek thought: it provoked the opposite extravagances of Heracleitos, who declared change to be the only form of existence, and of the Eleatics, who denied that it existed at all; but it also inspired the ordered and symmetrical beauty of the Parthenon and the Pindaric ode. 'When we feel the poetic thrill,' says Santayana, 'it is when we find

fulness in the concise, and depth in the clear ; and that seems to express with felicitous precision the genius of Hellenic art.'

A second such analogy is the discovery of *infinity*. Common sense observes measure and rule, complies with custom, and takes its ease when its day's work is done ; but we recognize a higher quality in the love that knows no measure, in the spiritual hunger and thirst which are never stilled. Therefore, at the height of our humanity, we find ourselves in the universe in proportion as it sustains and gives scope for an endlessly ranging and endlessly penetrating thought. The Stoics looked on the universe as a globe pervaded by what Munro unkindly calls *a rotund and rotatory god* ; at the circumference of which all existence, including that of space, simply stopped ; common sense revolts, but imagination is even more rudely balked, and we glory in the defiant description of Epicurus passing beyond the flaming walls of the world. Yet we are stirred with a far more potent intellectual sympathy when the idea is suggested, say by Spinoza, that space and time themselves are but particular modes of a universe which exists also in an infinite number of other ways ; or when, in the final cantos of Dante's *Paradiso*, after passing up from Earth, the centre, through the successive ever-widening spheres that circle round it, till we reach the Empyrean, the whole perspective and structure of the universe are suddenly inverted, and we see the real centre, God, as a single point of dazzling intensity, irradiating existence 'through and through.' Then we realize that the space we have been laboriously traversing is

only the illusive medium of our sense-existence, and without meaning for the Eternity and Infinity of divine reality.

This example has led us to the verge of another class of poetic ideas, those in which poetry discovers in the world not merely analogies of mind, but mind itself. This is the commonest, and in some of its phases the cheapest and poorest, intellectually, of all poetic ideas. It touches at one pole the naive personation which peoples earth and air for primitive man with spirits whom he seeks by ritual and magic to propitiate or to circumvent. The brilliant and beautiful woof of myth is, if we will, poetry as well as religion; the primitive and rudimentary poetry of a primitive and rudimentary religion. Yet it points, however crudely, to the subtler kinds of response which a riper poetic insight may discover. If the glorious anthropomorphism of Olympus and Asgard has faded for ever, the mystery of life, everywhere pulsing through Nature, and perpetually reborn 'in man and beast and earth and air and sea,' cries to the poet in every moment of his experience with a voice which will not be put by, and the symbols from soul-life by which he seeks to convey his sense of it, if they often read human personality too definitely into the play of that elusive mystery, yet capture something in it which escapes the reasoned formulas of science, and justify the claim of poetic experience to be the source of an outlook upon the world, of a vision of life, with which, no less than with those reached through philosophy and religion, civilization has to reckon.

The poetic consciousness of soul has thus left a



deep impress upon the medium of ideas through which we currently regard both Nature and Man. It has imbued with a richer significance and a livelier appeal those analogies in Nature of which I spoke ; turning the sublime but bare conceptions of continuity and substance into Wordsworth's *something more deeply interfused*, or Shelley's *Love . . . through the web of Being blindly wove* ; turning the abstraction of infinity into limitless aspiration, or into that 'infinite passion' which Browning felt across 'the pain of finite hearts that yearn.'

On the other hand, in its interpretation of Man, the poetic soul-consciousness, so extraordinarily intense on the emotional and imaginative side, has lifted these aspects of soul into prominence ; illuminating and sustaining everywhere the impassioned insight which carries men outside and beyond themselves, in heroism, in prophecy, in creation, in love ; which makes the past alive for them, and the future urgent ; which lifts them to a vision of good and evil beyond that of moral codes ; to the perception that danger is the true safety, and death, as Rupert Brooke said, 'safest of all' ; which in a word gives wing and scope and power to that in man which endures, as the stream endures though its water is ever gliding on, and makes us 'feel that we are greater than we know.'

I have tried to sketch out some of the ways in which a scientific poetry is possible without disparagement to either element in the description. Let me now proceed to apply some of these ideas to the great poet of science who is our immediate subject.



## II

In this assembly it is unnecessary to recall the little that is told, on dubious authority, of the life which began a little less than a hundred years before the Christian era, and ended when he was not much over forty, when Virgil was a very young man. All that is told of his life is the story that he went mad after receiving a love-philtre, composed the books of his great poem, *On the Nature of Things* in his lucid intervals, and finally died by his own hand. It is this tradition which Tennyson with great art has worked up into his noble poem. We need not here discuss the truth either of the tradition of madness or of that of suicide. What is certain is that no poem in the world bears a more powerful impress of coherent and continuous thought. While the poets of his own time and of the next generation, though deeply interested in his poetry and in his ideas, know nothing of the tragic story which first emerges in a testimony four centuries later.

Lucretius called his poem by the bald title *On the Nature of Things*. But no single term or phrase can describe the aims which, distinct but continually playing into and through one another, compose the intense animating purpose of the book. We may say that it is at once a scientific treatise, a gospel of salvation, and an epic of nature and man ; yet we are rarely conscious of any one of these aims to the exclusion of the rest. In none of these three aims was Lucretius wholly original. In each of them he had a great precursor among the

speculative thinkers and poets of Greece. His science roughly speaking was the creation of Democritus; his gospel of salvation was the work of Epicurus; and the greatest example of a poem on the nature of things, before his, had been given by Empedocles, the poet-philosopher of Agrigentum whom Matthew Arnold made the mouthpiece of his grave and lofty hymn of nineteenth-century pessimism. In his own country his only predecessor in any sense was Ennius, the old national poet who had first cast the hexameter in the stubborn mould of Latin speech, to whom he pays characteristically generous homage.

The atomic system of Democritus, which explained all things in the universe as combinations of different kinds of material particles, was a magnificent contribution to physical science, and the fertility of its essential idea is still unexhausted. It touched the problems of mind and life, of ethics and art, only indirectly, in so far as it resolved mind and all its activities into functions of matter and motion. Epicurus, on the other hand, a saintly recluse, bent only upon showing the way to a life of serene and cheerful virtue, took over the doctrine of the great physicist of Abdêra, without any touch of dispassionate speculative interest, as that which promised most effectual relief from disturbing interests and cares, and especially from the disturbance generated by fear of the gods and of a life after death. He might have gone to the great Athenian idealists of the fourth century, the immortal masters not only of those who know, but of those who think and create, whether in science or in poetry or in citizen-

ship. But his aim was precisely to liberate from these distracting energies, and allure a weary generation from the forum and the workshop, even the studio of letters or of art, and the temples of the gods, into the choice seclusion of his garden—the garden of a soul at peace, fragrant with innocent and beautiful things. What Epicurus added of his own to Democritus' theory was an accommodation not to truth but to convenience; and the measure of his scientific ardour is given by his easy toleration of conflicting explanations of the same phenomenon, provided they dispense with the intervention of the gods. While the measure of his attachment to poetry is given by his counsel to his disciples to go past it with stopped ears, as by the siren's deadly song.

It was this scientific doctrine, adopted by Epicurus in the interest not of science but of his gospel of deliverance from the cares of superstition, that Lucretius took over with the fervour of discipleship. He was not, like Pope in the *Essay of Man*, providing an elegant dress for philosophic ideas which he only half understood and abandoned in alarm when they threatened to be dangerous. He was the prophet of Epicureanism, and it is among the prophets of the faiths by which men live and die that we must seek a parallel to the passionate earnestness with which he proclaims to Memmius the saving gospel of Epicurus—to that same Memmius who a few years later showed his piety to Epicurus' memory by destroying his house. It was the hope of pouring the light and joy of saving truth upon the mind of this rather obtuse Roman, his beloved friend, that Lucretius laboured,

## 58 THE POETRY OF LUCRETIUS

he tells us, through the silent watches of the night, seeking phrase and measure which might make deep and hidden things clear.<sup>1</sup> But Lucretius felt and thought also as a poet and in the temper of poetry. He was not 'lending his pen' to a good cause, nor turning Greek science into Latin hexameters in order that they might be more vividly grasped or more readily remembered. He was conquering a new way in poetry; striking out a virgin path which no foot before his had trod. For Empedocles had had far narrower aims. And he calls on the Muses for aid with as devout a faith in his poetic mission in the great adventure as Milton had when he summoned Urania or some greater Muse to be his guide while he attempted 'things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.' What we admire unreservedly in him, declares a great French poet who died only the other day, Sully-Prudhomme, is the breath of independence which sweeps through the entire work of this most robust and precise of poets.

We see the temper of the poet at the outset, in the wonderful transfiguration which the gentle recluse Epicurus undergoes in the ardent brain of his Roman disciple. For it was of this enemy of disturbing emotion, this quietist of paganism, this timid and debonnaire humanitarian, that Lucretius drew the magnificent and astonishing portrait which immediately follows the prologue of the *De Rerum Natura*. The Lucretian Epicurus is a Prometheus—the heroic Greek who first of mortals dared to defy and withstand the monstrous tyrant Religion to her face. No fabled terror could appal

<sup>1</sup> I. 140 f.



him, no crashing thunder, nor the anger of heaven ; these only kindled the more the eager courage of his soul, to be the first to break the bars of Nature's gates. So the living might of his soul prevailed ; and he passed beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe ; returning thence in triumph to tell us what can, and what cannot, come into being ; having trampled under foot Religion who once crushed mankind, and lifted mankind in turn by his victory up to the height of heaven.

One might well surmise that a philosophy which a poet could thus ardently proclaim was itself, after all, not without the seeds and springs of poetry ; and that Lucretius in choosing to expound it in verse was not staking everything on his power of making good radical defects of substance by effective surface decoration or brilliant digressions. He recognized, no doubt, a difference in popular appeal between his substance and his form, and in a famous and delightful passage compares himself to the physician who touches the edge of the bitter cup with honey, ensnaring credulous childhood to its own good. So, he tells Memmius, he is spreading the honey of the Muses over his difficult matter, that he may hold him by the charm of verse until the nature of things have grown clear to his sight. But Lucretius is here putting himself at the point of view of the indifferent layman, and especially of the rather obtuse layman whose interest he was with almost pathetic eagerness seeking to capture. One guesses that Memmius, like the boy, was by no means reconciled to the wormwood because it was prefaced with honey ;



and modern critics who, like Mommsen, condemn his choice of subject as a blunder, come near to adopting the resentful boy's point of view. But in the splendid lines which immediately precede, though they form part of the same apology to Memmius, the poet involuntarily betrays his own very different conception of the matter. The hope of glory, he says, has kindled in his breast the love of the Muses, 'whereby inspired I am exploring a virgin soil of poetry hitherto untrodden by any foot. O the joy of approaching the unsullied springs, and quaffing them, O the joy of culling flowers unknown, whence may be woven a splendid wreath for my head, such as the Muses have arrayed no man's brows withal before; first because I am reporting on a great theme, and undoing the tight knot of superstition from the minds of men; and then because I convey dark matters in such transparent verse, touching everything with the Muses' charm.'<sup>1</sup>

Here, in spite of the last words, Lucretius clearly feels that his matter is something more than the wormwood which he overlays with honey; it is a vast region of implicit poetry which he, first of poets, is going to discover and annex; and he rests his claim to the poetic wreath he expects to win, in the first place upon this greatness of the subject matter itself, and secondly, not as the wormwood and honey theory would suggest, on the ingenious fancy which decorates or disguises it, but on the lucid style which allows it to shine in, as through a window, upon the ignorant mind.

<sup>1</sup> I. 922, 1.

## III

Let us then consider from this point of view the subject of Lucretius. This subject, as he conceives it, has two aspects. On the one side it is negative; —an annihilating criticism of all the crude religion founded upon fear—fear of the gods, fear of death and of something after death; criticism delivered with remorseless power and culminating in the sinewy intensity of the terrible line

Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum,

which transfixes once for all the consecrated principle of *tabu* everywhere dominant in the primitive faiths, the product of man's cowardice, as magic is the product of his pride.

The other aspect is constructive; the building up of the intellectual and moral framework of a worthy human life, by setting forth the true nature of the universe, the history of life, and the development of man; in other words, the story of his struggle through the ages, with the obstacles opposed to him by the power of untamed nature, by wild beasts, storms, inundations, by the rivalry and antagonism of other men, and by the wild unreason in his own breast. Lucretius saw as clearly as any modern thinker that man's conduct of his life, whether in the narrow circle of domestic happiness and personal duty, or in the larger sphere of civic polity, must be based upon a comprehension of the external world and of the past through which we have grown to what we are; and making allowance for his more limited resources

and his more confined point of view, he carried it out with magnificent power. So that if his poem remains in nominal intention a didactic treatise, in its inner substance and purport it might better be described as a colossal epic of the universe, with man for its protagonist and the spectres of the gods for its vanquished foes; and wanting neither the heroic exultations nor the tragic dooms, neither the melancholy over what passes nor the triumph in what endures, which go to the making of the greatest poetry.

These two aspects—criticism and construction—are thus most intimately bound together in the poem, but can yet be considered apart. And to each belongs its own peculiar and distinct vein of poetry. On the whole it is the former, at first sight so much less favourable to poetic purposes, which has most enthralled posterity. For the voice of Lucretius is here a distinctive, almost a solitary voice. The poets for the most part have been the weavers of the veil of dreams and visions in whose glamour the races of mankind have walked: but here came a poet, and one of the greatest, who rent the veil asunder and bade men gaze upon the nature of things naked and unadorned. And his austere chaunt of triumph as he pierces illusion and scatters superstition, has in it something more poignant and thrilling than many a song of voluptuous ecstasy or enchanted reverie. For, after all, the passing of an old order of things and the coming of a new has always at least the interest of colossal drama, and cannot leave us unmoved, however baneful we may hold the old order to have been, however we may exult in

the deliverance effected by the new. So Milton's celebration of the birth of Christ only reaches the heights of poetry when he is telling of the passing of the old pagan divinities :

The lonely mountains o'er  
And the resounding shore,  
A voice of weeping heard and loud lament ;  
From haunted spring and dale,  
Edged with poplar pale,  
The parting genius is with sighing sent ;  
With flower-inwoven tresses torn  
The nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thicket mourn.

Through the Christian's exultation there sounds, less consciously perhaps, but more clear, the Humanist scholar's sense of tragedy and pathos. In this sense Milton's Ode has affinity with poems like Schiller's *Gods of Greece*, where grief for the passing of the pagan faith is untouched by Christian sentiment ; but precisely its more complex and subtle emotion raises Milton's poem higher. In *Hyperion*, even more, we are made to feel the pathos of the passing of the fallen divinity of Saturn and his host ; and Hyperion himself, the sun-god of the old order of physical light, is more magnificently presented than Apollo, the sun-god of the new order of radiant intelligence and song. Lucretius, as we shall see, brings back the old divinity in a sublime way of his own ; but he feels the beneficence of the new order of scientific vision and inviolable law too profoundly to have any sense of pathos at the passing of the reign of superstition and caprice. He is rather possessed with flaming wrath as he recalls the towering evils of which that old regime had been guilty : the wrath of a prophet, more truly divine in spirit than the divinities he



assailed, as Prometheus is more divine than Zeus. Again and again we are reminded, as we read his great invectives, not of the sceptics mocking all gods indiscriminately in the name of enlightened good sense, but of a Hebrew prophet, chastising those who sacrifice to the gods of the Gentiles, in the name of the God of righteousness who refuses to be worshipped with offerings of blood. There is surely a spirit not far remote from this in the indignant pity with which he tells, in a famous and splendid passage, the sacrifice of Iphigenia at the divine bidding, as the price of the liberation of the Grecian fleet on its way to Troy :

How often has fear of the gods begotten impious and criminal acts ! What else was it that led the chieftains of Greece, foremost of men, foully to stain the altar of Artemis with the blood of the maiden Iphigenia ? Soon as the victim's band was bound about her virgin locks, and she saw her father grief-stricken before the altar, and at his side the priests concealing the knife, and the onlookers shedding tears at the sight, dumb with fear she sank on her knees to the ground. And it availed her nothing at that hour that she had been the first to call the king by the name of father ; for she was caught up by the hands of men, and borne trembling to the altar ; not to have a glad wedding hymn sung before her when these sacred rites were over, but to be piteously struck down, a victim, stained with her own stainless blood, by the hand of a father in the very flower of her bridal years ; and all in order to procure that a happy deliverance might be granted to the captive fleet. So huge a mass of evils has fear of the gods brought forth ! (I. 84-101.)<sup>1</sup>

Thus the crucial proof of the badness of the old religions is derived from the hideous violence done in their name to the natural and beautiful pieties of the family.

Yet, with all his fierce aversion for this baneful fear, Lucretius feels profoundly how natural it is. His intense imagination enters into the inmost

<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent passages are freely compressed here and there.



recesses of the human heart, and runs counter, as it were, to the argument of his powerful reason ; riveting upon our senses with almost intolerable force the beliefs which he is himself seeking to dispel ; so that though there is no trace of doubt or obscurity in his own mind, his words need only to be set in a different context to become a plea for that which he is using them to refute. Thus his very derision of the Stoic doctrine of an all-pervading God is conveyed in language of what one is again prompted to call Hebraic magnificence. ‘What power can rule the immeasurable All, or hold the reins of the great deep ? who can revolve the heavens and warm the earth with ethereal fires ? who can be everywhere present, making dark the sky and thrilling it with clashing sound . . . ? ’ (V. 1234 f.) Do we not seem to listen to an echo of the ironical questions of the Jahveh of the Book of Job ?

There he feels only scorn for the believer, in spite of his involuntary imaginative hold upon the belief. But in another passage we see the poet himself shudder with the fear that his logic is in the act of plucking up by the roots :

When we gaze upward at the great vault of heaven, and the empyrean fixed above the shining stars, and consider the paths of sun and moon, then the dread will start into life within us lest haply we should find it to be the immeasurable might of the gods which moves the blazing stars along their diverse ways. For dearth of argument tempts us to wonder whether the world was ever begotten, and whether it be destined to perish when its ceaseless movements have worn it out, or endowed with immortal life glide on perpetually, defying all the might of time. And then what man is there whose heart does not shrink with terror of the gods, whose limbs do not creep with fear, when the parched earth trembles at the lightning stroke, and the roar of thunder rolls through the sky ! Do not the

peoples shudder, and haughty kings quake with fear, lest for some foul deed or arrogant speech a dire penalty has been incurred and the hour be come when it must be paid? For when the might of the hurricane sweeps the commander of a fleet before it along the seas, with all his force of legions and elephants, does he not approach the gods with prayers for their favour and helping winds; and all in vain, for often enough none the less he is caught in the whirlpool and flung into the jaws of death? So utterly is some hidden power seen to consume the works of man, and to trample and deride all the symbols of his glory and his wrath (V. 1204 f.).

But beyond the fear of what the gods may do to us on earth, lay another more insidious and ineluctable fear—the dread of what may befall us after death. It was a main part of Lucretius's purpose to meet this by showing that death meant dissolution, and dissolution unconsciousness; but men continued to dread, and this is the reasoning, equally inconclusive and brilliant, with which he confronts them:

Therefore since death annihilates, and bars out from being altogether him whom evils might befall, it is plain that in death there is nothing for us to fear, and that a man cannot be unhappy who does not exist at all, and that it matters not a jot whether a man has been born, when death the deathless has swallowed up life that dies.

Therefore, when you see a man bewail himself that after death his body will rot, or perish in flames or in the jaws of beasts, his profession clearly does not ring true, and there lurks a secret sting in his heart, for all his denial that he believes there is any feeling in the dead. For, I take it, he does not fulfil his promise, nor follow out his principle, and sever himself out and out from life, but unconsciously makes something of himself survive. For when as a living man he imagines his future fate, and sees himself devoured by birds and beasts, he pities himself; for he does not distinguish between himself and the other, nor sever himself from the imagined body, but imagines himself to be it, and impregnates it with his own feeling. Hence he is indignant that he has been created mortal, nor sees that there will not in reality be after death another self, to grieve as a living being that he is dead, and feel pangs as he stands by, that he himself is lying there being mangled or consumed.

Then he supposes the dying man's friends to condole with him :

Now no more thy glad home shall welcome thee, nor a beloved wife, nor sweet children run to snatch kisses, touching thy heart with secret delight. No more wilt thou be prosperous in thy doings, no more be a shelter to thy dear ones. A single, cruel day has taken from thee, hapless man, all the need of life. So they tell you, but they forget to add that neither for any one of these things wilt thou any longer feel desire (III. 863).

#### IV

So much then for the first aspect of Lucretius's poem—the criticism of the old religions. Most of the recognized and famous 'poetry' of the book is connected, like the passages I have quoted, with this negative side of his creed. But I am more concerned to show that a different and not less noble vein of poetry was rooted in the rich positive appetencies of his nature ; in his acute and exquisite senses ; in the vast and sublime ideas which underlay his doctrine of the world ; in his intense apprehension of the zest of life ; and, on the other hand, penetrating, like an invisible but potent spirit, the texture of his reasoned unconcern, his profound, unconfessed sense of the pathos of death, his melancholy in the presence of the doom of universal dissolution which he foresaw for the world and for mankind.

Let us look first at the main constructive idea ; the atomic theory of Leucippus and Democritus, taken over by Epicurus and expounded by Lucretius.

For this theory was in effect, and probably in intention, a device for overcoming that antithesis of the One and the Many, of Permanence and Change,

of which I have spoken. The Eleatics had declared that pure Being was alone real, and denied Change and Motion; Heracleitus declared that nothing was real but Change, and the only perpetuity 'flux.' The founder of atomism, Leucippus, showed that it was possible to hold, in the phrase of Browning's philosophic Don Juan, that there is in 'all things change, and permanence as well,' by supposing that shifting and unstable world of the senses, where all things die and are born, to be composed of uncreated and indestructible elements. Underlying the ceaseless fluctuations of Nature, and life as we see them, lay a continuity of eternal substance, of which they were the passing modes;—one of the greatest of philosophical conceptions, Mr. Santayana has called it, but one also appealing profoundly to the specifically poetic intuition which I have described. Whether the permanent apprehended through the flux of sense be a spiritual substance like Plato's ideas, or Shelley's 'white radiance of eternity,' or whether it be the constant form and function of the flowing river, as in Wordsworth's Duddon sonnet; or whether, as here, it be a background of material particles perpetually combining and resolved, we have the kind of intuition which gives the thrill of poetry; we discover 'sweep in the concise, and depth in the clear,' infinite perspectives open out in the moment and in the point, and however remote the temper of Spinozan mysticism may be, we yet in some sort see things 'in the light of eternity.'

In Lucretius this conception found a mind capable of being ravished by its imaginative grandeur,



as well as of pursuing it indefatigably through the thorniest mazes of mechanical proof. The contagious fervour which breathes through his poem is no mere ardour of the disciple bent on winning converts, or the joy of the literary craftsman as his hexameters leap forth glowing on the anvil ; it is the sacred passion of one who has had a sublime vision of life and nature, and who bears about the radiance of it into all the work to which he has set his hand. It is not because of anything that Lucretius adds to Epicurus—in theory he really adds nothing at all—that the impression produced by his poem differs so greatly from that of all we know—in fragments and at second hand, it is true—of Epicurus's own writings. The ultimate principles are the same, but the accent is laid at a different point. The parochial timidities of Epicurus have left their traces on the Roman's page, but they appear as hardly more than rudimentary survivals among the native inspirations of a man of heroic mettle and valour, Roman tenacity, and native sweep of mind. He cannot quite break free from some speculative foibles which show the Master's shallow opportunism at its worst—such as the dictum that the sun is about as large as it looks, a lamp hung a little above the earth, and daily lighted and put out ; but he becomes himself when he lets his imagination soar into the infinities of time and space which his faith opens out or leaves room for. It is a triumph of poetry as well as of common sense when he scoffs at the Stoic dogma of a Space which abruptly comes to an end ; when he stations an archer at the barrier and ironically bids him shoot his arrow into the nothingness



## 70 THE POETRY OF LUCRETIOUS

beyond. Or in more sombre mood, how grave an intensity he puts into a common thought, like that of the end of life, by the sublimely terrible epithet *immortal* which he applies to death :

Mortalem vitam Mors cum immortalis ademit (III. 869).

or into a mere reminder that birth and death are always with us, by making us feel the endless concomitant succession through the ages of funeral wailings, and the cry of the new-born child (II. 578). He accepts without question the swerving of the atoms, devised by Epicurus—child and man of genius at once—to refute the Stoic dogma of necessity ; but what possesses his mind and imagination is not these intrusions of caprice, but the great continuities and uniformities of existence, which follow from the perpetual dissolution and remaking of life. ‘ Rains die, when father ether has tumbled them into the lap of mother earth ; but then goodly crops spring up and trees laden with fruit ; and by them we and the beasts are fed, and joyous cities teem with children and the woods ring with the song of young birds ’ (I. 250 f.).

Only, as such passages show, Lucretius grasps these uniformities and continuities not as theoretic abstractions, but as underlying conditions of the teeming multiplicity and joyous profusion of living Nature. His senses, imagination, and philosophic intellect, all phenomenally acute and alert, wrought intimately together ; and he enters into and exposes the life of the individual thing with an intensity of insight and a realistic precision and power which quicken us with its warm pulse, and burn its image upon our brain, without ever relaxing

our consciousness that it is part of an endless process, and the incidental expression of an unalterable law. For him, indeed, as for Dante, individuality is an intrinsic part of law, and law of individuality. Every being has its place and function, its 'deep fixed boundaries' (*terminus alte haerens*). The very stone, for Dante, cleaves to the spot where it lies. And the Roman as well as the philosopher in Lucretius scornfully contrasts with this Nature of minute and ubiquitous law the fluid and chaotic world of myth, where anything might become anything (cf. V. 126 f.).

## V

None the less, his conception of the nature of the process itself does insensibly undergo a change. In the mind of an exponent so richly endowed and so transparently sincere, the hidden flaw in his system could not but at some point disturb its imposing coherence. Atomism could not at bottom explain life, and life poured with too abounding a tide through the heart and brain of Lucretius not to sap in some degree the authority of his mechanical calculus, and to lend a surreptitious persuasiveness to inconsistent analogies derived from the animated soul. Without ostensibly disturbing the integrity of his Epicurean creed, such analogies have, in two ways, infused an alien colour into his poetry and alien implications into his thought. In the first place, he feels, as such abounding natures will, that life—'the mere living'—is somehow very good, in spite of all the evils it brings in its train, and death pathetic in spite of

all the evils from which it sets us free. When he is demonstrating that the world cannot have been made by gods, he set forth its grave inherent flaws of structure and arrangement with merciless trenchancy—*tantâ stat praedita culpâ* (V. 199); and like Lear, he makes the new-born child wail because he is come into a world where so many griefs await him. And no one ever urged with more passionate eloquence that it is unreasonable to fear to die. None the less, phrases charged with a different feeling about life continually escape him. He speaks of the *praeclara mundi natura* (V. 157). To begin to live is to 'rise up into the divine borders of light' (I. 20). And secondly, despite his philosophical assurance, incessantly repeated, that birth and death are merely different aspects of the same continuous mechanical process, and that nothing receives life except by the death of something else, 'Alid ex alio reficit natura, nec ullam Rem gigni patitur, nisi morte adiuta aliena' (I. 264, etc.), he cannot suppress suggestions that the creative energy of the world is akin to that which with conscious desire and will brings forth the successive generations of Man. And so, in the astonishing and magnificent opening address, the poet who was about to demonstrate that the gods lived eternally remote from the life of men, calls upon Venus, the legendary mother of his own race, as the divine power ever at work in this teeming universe, the giver of increase, bringing all things to birth, from the simplest corn blade to the might and glory of the Roman Empire:

Mother of the Roman race, delight of gods and men, benign Venus, who under the gliding constellations of heaven fillest with

thy presence the sea with its ships and the earth with its fruits, seeing that by thy power all the races of living things are conceived and come to being in the light of day; before thee, O goddess, the winds take flight, and the clouds of heaven at thy coming; at thy feet the brown earth sheds her flowers of a thousand hues, before thee the sea breaks into rippling laughter, and the sky rejoicing glows with radiant light (I. 1 f.).

So grave and impassioned an appeal cannot be treated as mere rhetorical ornament. If we call it figure, it is figure of the kind which is not a 'poetical' substitute for prose, but conveys something for which no other terms are adequate. Lucretius, the exponent of Epicurus, doubtless intended no heresy against the Epicurean theology; but Lucretius, the poet, was carried by his vehement imagination to an apprehension of the creative energies of the world so intense and acute that the great symbol of Venus rendered it with more veracity than all that calculus of atomic movements which he was about to expound, and by which his logical intellect with perfect sincerity believed it to be adequately explained.

Far less astonishing than his bold rehabilitation of the goddess of Love is his fetishistic feeling for the Earth, the legendary mother of men. For him too, as for primeval myth, she is the 'universal mother,' who in her fresh youth brought forth flower and tree, and bird and beast; from whose body sprang finally the race of man itself; nay, he tells us how the infants crept forth, 'from wombs rooted in the soil,' and how, wherever this happened, earth yielded naturally through her pores a liquor most like to milk, 'even as nowadays every woman when she has given birth is filled with sweet milk,



because all that current of nutriment streams towards the breast' (V. 788 f.).

It is true that elsewhere Lucretius speaks with rationalistic condescension of the usage which calls the Earth a mother and divine, as a phrase like Bacchus for wine or Ceres for corn, permissible so long as no superstitious fear is annexed to it (II. 652 f.). But it is plain that the Earth's motherhood had a grip upon his poet's imagination quite other than could be exerted by any such tag of poetic diction. Doubtless the fervour with which he insists on it—'Therefore again and again Earth is rightly called Mother, seeing that she brought forth the race of men and every beast and bird in its due season'—is not wholly due to poetic motives. He is eager to refute the Stoic doctrine that men were sprung from heaven. But the poet in him is, all the same, entranced by the sublimity of the conception he is urging, and he describes it with an afflatus which dwarfs that Stoic doctrine, and makes the splendid legend of Cybele the Earth Mother, elaborated by the Greek poets, seem puerile with all its beauty. 'In the beginning Earth hath in herself the elements whence watersprings pouring forth their coolness perpetually renew the boundless Sea, and whence fires arise, making the ground in many places hot, and belching forth the surpassing flames of *Ætna*. Then she bears shining corn and glad woodlands for the support of men, and rivers and leaves and shining pastures for the beasts that haunt the hills. Wherefore she is called the mother of the gods and mother of beasts and men' (II. 589 f.).

This all-creating Earth is far enough no doubt



from the benign Nature of Wordsworth, who moulds her children by silent sympathy. But it is not so remote from the Earth of Meredith, the Mother who brings Man 'her great venture' forth, bears him on her breast and nourishes him there, but 'more than that embrace, that nourishment, she cannot give.'

He may entreat, aspire,  
 He may despair, and she has never heed.  
 She drinking his warm sweat will soothe his need,  
 Not his desire.

Meredith too sees man, in dread of her, clutching at invisible powers, as Lucretius's sea-captain in the storm makes vows to the gods. And Meredith's thought that man rises by 'spelling at' her laws is no less Lucretian. But Meredith's story of Earth is full of hope, like his story of man. It is perpetual advance. With Lucretius it is otherwise.

For the Earth is not only our Mother; she is our tomb (II. 1148 f.). And the eternal energy of creation is not only matched by the eternal energy of dissolution, but here and now is actually yielding ground to it. The Earth, so prolific in her joyous youth, is now like a woman who has ceased to bear, 'worn out by length of days' (V. 820 f.). In the whole universe birth and death absolutely balance, the equation of mechanical values is never infringed; the universe has no history, only a continuous substitution of terms. But each living thing has a history, it knows the exultation of onset and the melancholy of decline; and its fear of death is not cancelled by the knowledge that in that very moment, and in consequence of that very fact, some other living thing will be born. And thus

Lucretius, feeling for our Earth as a being very near to us, and with which the issues of our existence are involved, applies the doctrine to her without shrinking indeed, but not without a human shudder. The Earth had a beginning, and ineluctable reason forces us to conclude that she will have an end, and this not by a gradual evanescence or dispersion, but by a sudden, terrific catastrophe, as in a great earthquake, or world conflagration (V. 95 f.).

And he feels this abrupt extinction of the Earth and its inhabitants to be tragic, notwithstanding that extinction is, by his doctrine, only the condition of creation, and that at the very moment of her ruin, some other earth will be celebrating its glorious birth. Earth has for him a life-history, a biography, and he forgets that she is strictly but a point at which the eternal drift of atoms thickened for a time to a cluster, to be dispersed again. Thus we see how this mechanical system, ardently embraced by a poet, working freely upon him, and itself coloured and transformed by his mind, stirred in him two seemingly opposed kinds of poetic emotion at once: the sublime sense of eternal existence, and the tragic pathos of sudden doom and inexorable passing away.

Hence the *melancholy* that in Lucretius goes along with an enormous sense of life. To say that he puts the 'Nevermore' of romantic sentimentality in the place of that dispassionate 'give and take' of mechanics would do wrong to the immense virility which animates every line of this athlete among poets. Of the cheap melancholy of discontent he knows as little as of the cheap satisfaction of complacency, or of that literary melan-

choly, where the sigh of Horace, or Ronsard, or Herrick, over the passing of roses and all other beautiful things covers a sly diplomatic appeal to the human rosebud to be gathered while still there is time. No, the melancholy of Lucretius is like that of Dürer's 'Melancholia,' the sadness of strong intellect and far-reaching vision as it contemplates the setting of the sun of time and the ebbing of the tides of mortality; or like Wordsworth's mournful music of dissolution, only to be heard by an ear emancipated from vulgar joys and fears; or like the melancholy of Keats—the veiled goddess who hath her shrine in the very temple of delight—the *amari aliquid*, in Lucretius's own yet more pregnant words, which lurks in the very sweetness of the flower.

Thus our 'scientific poet' appears in an extraordinary if not unique way to have united the functions and temper and achievement of science and poetry. He 'knew the causes of things,' and could set them forth with marvellous precision and resource; and the knowledge filled him with lofty joy as of one standing secure above the welter of doubt and fear in which the mass of men pass their lives. To have reached this serene pinnacle of intellectual security seemed to his greatest follower Virgil a happiness beyond the reach of his own more tender and devout genius, and he commemorated it in splendid verses which Matthew Arnold in our own day applied to Goethe:

And he was happy, if to know  
Causes of things, and far below  
His feet to see the lurid flow  
Of terror and insane distress  
And headlong fate, be happiness.

There is, it may be, something that repels us, something slightly inhuman, in this kind of lonely happiness, and Lucretius does little to counteract that impression when he himself compares it, in another famous passage, to the satisfaction of one who watches the struggle of a storm-tost ship from the safe vantage-ground of the shore. Yet Lucretius is far from being the lonely egoist that such a passage might suggest; his poem itself was meant as a helping hand to lift mankind to his own security: he knew what devoted friendship was, and we have pleasant glimpses of him wandering with companions among the mountains,<sup>1</sup> or sharing a rustic meal stretched at ease on the grass by a running brook.<sup>2</sup> Lucretius like his master had no social philosophy, and it is his greatest deficiency as a thinker; but he was not poor in social feeling. His heart went out to men, as a physician, not coldly diagnosing their disease, but eager to cure them.

And so his feeling for Nature, for the universe of things, though rooted in his scientific apprehension, is not bounded by it. He seizes upon the sublime conceptions which his science brought to his view—the permanent substance amid perennial change, the infinity of space and time—and his vivid mind turns these abstractions into the radiant vision of a universe to which the heaven of heavens, as the old poets had conceived it, ‘was but a veil.’ But he went further, and shadowed forth, if half-consciously and in spite of himself, the yet greater poetic thought, of a living power pervading the whole, drawing the elements of being together

<sup>1</sup> IV. 575.<sup>2</sup> II. 29.



by the might of an all-permeating Love. And thus Lucretius, the culminating expression of the scientific thinking of Democritus and of the gospel of Epicurus, foreshadows Virgil, whom he so deeply influenced, and prophesies faintly but perceptibly of Dante and of Shelley; as his annihilating exposure of the religions founded upon fear insensibly prepared the way for the religions of hope and love.



### III

## MOUNTAIN SCENERY IN KEATS





### III

## MOUNTAIN SCENERY IN KEATS

THE 'love of mountains' which plays so large a part in the poetry of the age of Wordsworth, and has so few close analogies in that of any other country or any earlier time, offers matter of still unexhausted interest to the student of poetic psychology. This is not the place to consider how it happened that any mass of boldly crumpled strata, on a certain scale, became in the course of the eighteenth century charged with a kind of spiritual electricity which set up powerful answering excitements in the sensitive beholder. Gray already in 1739 expressed the potential reach and compass of these excitements in our psychical life when he called the scenery of the Grande Chartreuse 'pregnant with religion and poetry'—a thought which Wordsworth's sublime verses on the Simplon, sixty years later, only made explicit. Not all the mountain-excitement of the time was of this quality; and we can distinguish easily enough between the 'picturesque,' 'romantic' mountain sentiment of Scott, to whom the Trossachs

## 84 MOUNTAIN SCENERY IN KEATS

and Ben Venue spoke most eloquently when they sounded to the pad of a horseman's gallop, and the 'natural religion' of Wordsworth, to whom the same pass wore the air of a 'Confessional' apt for autumnal meditation on the brevity of life. In the younger poets of the age mountain sentiment is less original and profound than in Wordsworth, less breezily elemental than in Scott. The mountain poetry of Wordsworth concurred, as an explicit stimulus to mountain sentiment, with the inarticulate spell of the mountains themselves, transforming in some degree the native feeling and experience of almost all mountain-lovers of the next twenty years, even when they were of the calibre of Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley. Yet even where the Wordsworthian colour is most perceptible, as in *The Hymn in the Vale of Chamouni*, in *Alastor, Mont Blanc*, and in the Third Canto of *Childe Harold*, the younger poet has seen his mountains with his own eyes and through the glamour of his own passions, impregnated them with his own genius and temperament. Shelley's mountains are no longer the quiet brotherhood of Grasmere, with a listening star atop, but peaks of flamelike aspiration, or embodied protests against men's code of crime and fraud; Byron's are warriors calling joyously to one another over the lit lake across the storm. For all these poets—even for Scott when he *was* a poet—mountain scenery was not so much new matter to be described as a new instrument of expression, a speaking symbol for their own spiritual appetencies and ideal dreams. Of its importance for the poetry of any one of them there cannot be a moment's doubt.

There remains, however, another poet, the youngest, the shortest-lived, but in some respects the most gifted of the whole group. On a general view Keats appears to be sharply distinguished, in regard to the characteristic here in question, from all the rest. Mountains and mountain sentiment seem to have a quite negligible place in his poetry. It may be worth while to consider how far this is really the case.

## I

If we look to the sources of his experience, Keats was more nearly secluded from the stimulus of mountain scenery than any of his compeers. By the outward circumstances of his birth and breeding he was in reality the 'cockney poet' of later derisive criticism. During the whole formative period of youth he hardly encountered even 'wild' scenery; what lay about him in his infancy was at best the semi-suburban meadow and woodland landscape of Edmonton, or the 'little hill' (of Hampstead) on which he 'stood tiptoe' to command a wider view. Before the summer of 1818 there is no sign that either 'mountain power' or 'mountain mystery' had any meaning for him. He deeply admired Wordsworth, and regarded *The Excursion* as one of the three things to rejoice at in that age; but it was Wordsworth as an interpreter of human life, the poet who 'thought into the human heart' (to Reynolds, May 1818), rather than the mountain lover. There is no clear trace as yet in his earlier poetry of Cumberland fells; there is none whatever of the great mountain

mythology of Wordsworth. No menacing peak had ever towered up between him and the stars, no far-distant hills had sent an alien sound of melancholy to his ear. Not that he owes nothing as a poet to the mythic rendering of mountains. On the contrary, up to this date, all his imagining of mountains, in the stricter sense, is derived from, or at least touched with, myth. Only it is the myth of classic legend, not of modern 'natural religion.' Had not the 'lively Grecians' inhabited a 'land of hills,' these would hardly have entered even as largely as they do into the enchanted scenery of *Endymion*; and on the whole it is a scenery of woods and waters, flowery glades and ocean caverns, not of Olympian heights. But if Keats's experience of nature is still limited, it is used to the full. *Endymion*, at first sight a tissue of exquisite dreams, is full of the evidence of his no less exquisite perception of the living nature within his reach. From the very outset we are aware that the 'things of beauty' he loved best and knew most intimately in the natural world were woods and flowers and streams. There is no mention, in that opening survey, of hills, and when they come perforce into the story they are arrayed as far as may be in the semblance of these beloved things. 'A mighty forest' is 'outspread upon the sides of Latmus' (i. 62); in the summons to the Shepherds, the highland homes are touched vaguely and without interest ('whether descended from beneath the rocks that overtop your mountains'), while he lingers with evident delight upon the 'swelling downs'



. . . where sweet air stirs  
 Blue hare-bells lightly and where prickly furze  
 Buds lavish gold. (i. 201.)

as later, no less daintily, upon the

. . . hill-flowers running wild  
 In pink and purple chequer. (ii. 286.)

The ideal dwelling for Endymion and his 'swan of Ganges' will be under the brow of a steep hill, but they will be embowered in ivy and yew, and the hill itself, like their bridal couch, will be 'mossy'—the haunting character of the Keatsian woodland and its 'winding ways' (iv. 670).

On the other hand, some of the hills in *Endymion*, like 'fountain'd Helicon,' are purely legendary, and the higher and bolder ones derive their characters from the tales of Olympus or Cyllene. Between nature and classic myth there was for Keats no trace of the disparity which so deeply offended Wordsworth; his imagination passed without thought of discord from one to the other, or blended them together; it was probably the Nature poet yet more than the Christian in Wordsworth who responded so coldly ('A pretty piece of paganism') when the young poet brought his train of Bacchanals 'over the light-blue hills.' It is of Arcadian boar-hunts that we have to think when Endymion on the mountain-heights will 'once more make his horn parley from their foreheads hoar' (i. 478), or sees the thunderbolt hurled from his threshold (ii. 203); it is an Arcadian shepherd whose 'pipe comes clear from aery steep' (iii. 359). And it is at



## 88 MOUNTAIN SCENERY IN KEATS

least no English mountain of whose 'icy pinnacles' we have a momentary and here quite isolated glimpse.

### II

But while the mountain-drawing in *Endymion* is on the whole vague and derivative, there are hints that Keats was already becoming alive to the imaginative spell of great mountains, to their power in poetry, and for his poetry. When he imagines the moonlit earth, he sees it partly in delicate miniature like the image of the nested wren, who takes glimpses of the moon from beneath a sheltering ivy-leaf, but this is coupled with a picture of Miltonic grandeur and tumult:

Innumerable mountains rise, and rise,  
Ambitious for the hallowing of thine eyes. (iii. 59.)

He was already on the way to that clear recognition of his need of great mountains which speaks from his famous explanation of the motives of the northern tour which he undertook, with Brown, in the summer of 1818—the crucial event of his history from our present point of view. 'I should not have consented to myself,' he wrote to Bailey, 'these four months tramping in the highlands, but that I thought that it would give me more experience, rub off more prejudice, use me to more hardship, identify finer scenes, load me with grander mountains, and strengthen more my reach in Poetry, than would stopping at home among books, even though I should read Homer.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 18 July 1818.

The passage has great psychological value, for it shows how closely involved his nascent apprehension of mountains was with the other spiritual appetencies urgent within him in these months. To be 'loaded with grander mountains' he thought of as an integral part of an inner process of much wider scope, of which the common note was to be the bracing and hardening of a mind which had not yet won complete control of its supreme gift of exquisite sensation. The 'grander mountains' were to be only one of the bracing forces, but it is clear that he felt this new force, under whose sway he was for a while about to live, akin to others which his letters show to have been alluring him during these months. The bare rugged forms of the mountains he was now to explore accorded subtly for him with the hardihood and endurance of the climber, and not less with the severity of the epic poet, who, like Milton, preferred 'the ardours to the pleasures of song,' or who, like Homer, allowed us fugitive but sublime glimpses of the mountains which looked down upon the scene of his Tale. When Keats and Brown came down upon the town of Ayr, they had before them 'a grand Sea view terminated by the black Mountains of the isle of Arran. As soon as I saw them so nearly I said to myself: How is it they did not beckon Burns to some grand attempt at Epic?'<sup>1</sup> Keats perhaps thought of the Isle of Tenedos, which similarly dominates the plain of Troy across a reach of sea; 'You would lift your eyes from Homer only to see close before you the real Isle of Tenedos,' he was writing to

<sup>1</sup> 13 July 1818, to Tom Keats.

Reynolds in a different context on the same day. That one peaked Isle should stand out in Keats's mind from all the other imagery of Homer, and that he should wonder at the failure of another to beget new Iliads in the unhomeric Burns, shows with much precision how his literary passion for the Homeric poetry was now quickened and actualized by the visible presence of grand mountains.

It is needless (though not irrelevant) to dwell here upon other kindred features of the expanding horizons which came into view for Keats in this momentous year: the resolve to renounce his 'luxurious' art for philosophy and knowledge;<sup>1</sup> and the disdain for women, for effeminate characters, for the pleasures of domesticity. In each case the urgency of this passion for what he felt more bracing, more intellectually fortifying, more masculine, found vent, for a time, in language too peremptory and exclusive to be true to the needs of his rich and complex nature.<sup>2</sup> Philosophy would, had he lived, assuredly have ministered more abundantly to his poetry, but *Lamia* shows how far she was from becoming its master, or its substitute; the Miltonic ardours of *Hyperion* were to be qualified in the renewed but chastened and ennobled 'luxury' of *St. Agnes' Eve* and the *Odes*. The man who wrote: 'the roaring of

<sup>1</sup> April 1818, to Taylor.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. his amusing outburst at Teignmouth, in the previous March, at the effeminacy he ascribed to the men of Devon. 'Had England been a large Devonshire, we should not have won the battle of Waterloo. There are knotted oaks, there are lusty rivulets, there are meadows such as are not elsewhere—there are valleys of feminine climate—but there are no thews and sinews,' etc. March 13th, to Bailey.

the wind is my wife and the stars through the windowpane are my children,' would yet have found a place for noble womanhood within his 'masculine' ideal, had not a tragical influence intervened. And, similarly, the traces of his mountain experience fade after 1818, a new order of symbols, more congenial at bottom to the ways of his imagination, asserts or reasserts itself in his poetry; and it is hardly an accident that in the revised *Hyperion* of a year later we approach the granite precipices and everlasting cataracts of the original poem by way of a garden, a temple, and a shrine.

### III

For, evidently, it is in *Hyperion*, if anywhere, that we have to seek the afterglow of that experience of 'grander mountains' which, in June, he had set out to encounter. We must not indeed look in poetry of this quality for those detailed reproductions of what he had seen which Wordsworth condemned as 'inventories' in Scott, but which are not strange either to the lower levels of his own verse. Even in the letters written for the entertainment of a sick brother Keats rarely describes; and constantly, to others, he breaks off impatiently when he has begun. 'My dear Reynolds—I cannot write about scenery and visitings.' His impressions come from him in brief, sudden, unsought phrases; he left it to the methodic Brown to give the enchanting and 'picturesque' detail of mountains and valleys 'in the manner of the Laputan printing-press.'



'I have been among wilds and mountains too much to break out much about their grandeur,' he writes a little later to Bailey. But there is no doubt of the impression. He had hoped that his experience would 'load' him with grander mountains; and, in fact, as he goes on to tell, 'The first mountains I saw, though not so large as some I have since seen, *weighed* very solemnly upon me.' And Brown tells us that when Windermere first burst upon their view, 'he stopped as if stupefied with beauty.'<sup>1</sup>

Their actual experiences of mountain-climbing were few. Weather checked them at Helvellyn, and expense at Ben Lomond; but in the 'bleak air atop' of Skiddaw, as Lamb had called it, 'I felt as if I were going to a Tournament.' What he felt about the Arran mountains we have seen. Ailsa Craig—the seafowl-haunted 'craggy ocean pyramid,' evoked 'the only sonnet of any worth I have of late written.' They found the north end of Loch Lomond 'grand to excess,' and Keats made a rude pen-and-ink sketch of 'that blue place among the mountains.' But their greatest experience was doubtless the climb on Ben Nevis, on 2 August. The chasms below the summit of Nevis seemed to him 'the most tremendous places I have ever seen,' 'the finest wonder of the whole—they appear great rents in the very heart of the mountain, . . . other huge crags rising round . . . give the appearance to Nevis of a shattered heart or core in itself.'

The plan of a poem on the war of the gods and Titans was already shaped or shaping in his mind

<sup>1</sup> Lord Houghton, quoted by Buxton Forman, *Letters*, LXI.



when Keats set out for the north. As early as September 1817 he had had in view 'a new romance' for the following summer; in keeping with the new aspirations which that summer brought, the 'romance' was now to be an epic. The most potent influence governing the execution, that of Milton, is familiar, and does not directly concern us here. Still less can we consider the possible effect of companionship with those three little volumes of Cary's *Dante*, the single book taken with him on this tour.<sup>1</sup> But while the spell of *Paradise Lost* is apparent in the cast of the plot, above all in the debate of the Titans, and in the style, an influence to which Milton's is wholly alien asserts itself in the delineation of the Titanic 'den' itself. Clearly based upon the idea of an Inferno, this 'sad place' where 'bruised Titans' are 'chained in torture,' is yet full of traits which recall neither Milton nor Dante, but rather one of those amazing chasms on Nevis, which seemed to be the very 'core' of the great mountain. He had, even, as he looked down into that vaporous gulf, actually thought of the image of Hell. Milton's Hell is a plain of burning earth vaulted with fire and verging on a sea of flame<sup>2</sup>; if there is a hill (i. 670) it is a volcano, belching fire, or coated with a sulphurous

<sup>1</sup> It is not irrelevant, however, in this context, to recall that Dante's account of his Dream-journey has been thought to give evidence of actual climbing experience. The Purgatory mountain was provided with a good path; but the Inferno, with its precipitous walls, was less easily negotiated. He had, however, the services of a most competent Guide! Cf. H. F. Tozer, *Mod. Quart.*, April 1899.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 'vaulted with fire,' *Paradise Lost*, i. 298, with 'the vaulted rocks,' *Hyperion*, ii. 348.

## 94 MOUNTAIN SCENERY IN KEATS

scurf. The Keatsian Inferno is genuinely, what he calls it, a 'den,' a yawning mountain dungeon overarched with jutting crags, floored with hard flint and slaty ridge, and encompassed by a deafening roar of waterfalls and torrents. A shattered rib of rock, with his iron mace beside it, attests the spent fury of Creus. Enceladus lies uneasily upon a craggy shelf. To render the spectacle of the ruined and almost lifeless bodies lying 'vast and edgeways,' he calls in a definite reminiscence, the 'dismal cirque' of Druid stones near Keswick. He has felt too the silence of the mountains in the pauses of the winter wind, though he speaks of it only to contrast it with the organ voice of Saturn preceding the expectant murmur of his audience of fallen divinities (ii. 123).<sup>1</sup> The darkness, too, in which they languish is not eternal and ordained like that of Milton's Hell; the coming of the Sun-god will invade it with a splendour like the morn and

. . . all the beetling gloomy steeps,  
All the sad spaces of oblivion,  
And every gulf, and every chasm old,  
And every height, and every sullen depth,  
Voiceless, or hoarse with loud tormented streams,  
And all the everlasting cataracts,  
And all the headlong torrents, far and near,  
Mantled before in darkness and huge shade, (ii. 358)

will stand revealed in that terrible splendour.

It is clear that in this great passage Keats has deliberately invoked the image of a sunrise among precipitous mountains; and these lines assure him a lasting place amongst our poet interpreters of mountain glory. We must beware, as we have

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the sonnet written at the top.

seen, of overstressing the element of realism in the poem. Keats was not *describing* mountain scenery, English, Scotch, or any other, but using certain aspects of it, which had been vividly brought home to him as he climbed or trudged, to render poetic inspirations of far richer compass and wider scope. Much of the detail of this Titan prison belongs as little to his British mountain experience as do the Titans themselves. Iapetus grasps a strangled serpent; Asia, dreaming of palm-shaded temples and sacred isles, leans upon an elephant tusk. We are conscious of no discord, so pervading is the impress of a single potent imagination, whatever the material it employs. But it is not immaterial to note that, as Professor de Sélincourt has pointed out, Keats did alter the original draft of Hyperion's coming in such a way as to give it a close resemblance to a sunrise among the mountains, omitting two lines which preceded the last but one quoted above:

And all the Caverns soft with moss and weed,  
Or dazzling with bright and barren gems.

The former of these lines may be described as a momentary reversion to the tender 'mossy' luxuriance of the *Endymion* scenery, like the 'nest of pain' (ii. 90), which, however, he allowed to stand.<sup>1</sup> Its excision, in the final version, marks Keats's sense of the incongruity of that earlier symbolism with the sterner matter in hand, as does the transformation of the dreamy, pastoral

<sup>1</sup> Referred to also by Professor de Sélincourt (note *ad loc.*), though he ascribes it (somewhat sternly) to the 'vulgarity of Hunt.'

Oceanus of the earlier poem into the master of Stoic wisdom, able 'to bear all naked truths, and to envisage circumstance, all calm,' who offers his bitter balm to the despairing Titans, in the later.

*Hyperion*, we know, was left a fragment, and with deliberate purpose. The mighty shade of Milton, he came to feel, deflected him from his proper purpose in poetry. It is less important, but not less true, that his passing vision of grand mountains was not in complete consonance with his genius, and that his brief anthem of mountain poetry had in it something of the nature of a *tour de force*. The mountains were for him neither strongholds of faith nor sources of sublime consolation. Even in the letters written in their presence he could speak somewhat impatiently, as we have seen, of 'scenery' compared with life and men. And if he places his ruined Titans in this wild den among the crags and torrents, it is because there was something in him, deeper than his reverence for Wordsworth or for mountain grandeur, which felt the very savagery of the scene, its naked aloofness from everything human, to be in accord with the primeval rudeness of an outdone and superseded race. It is not for nothing that, when the scene changes from the old order to the new, we are transported from Hyperion's sun-smitten precipices to the sea-haunted lawns and woodlands of Delos, where the young Apollo is seen wandering forth in the morning twilight

Beside the osiers of a rivulet,  
Full ankle-deep in lilies of the vale.



Do we not hear in this the home-coming accents,  
as of one who has escaped from barbarous Thynia  
and Bithynia, and tastes the joy that is born

‘cum mens onus reponit, ac peregrino  
labore fessi venimus larem ad nostrum’?

Keats had, in effect, come home.

Yet the deflection, if it strained, also braced ;  
and if in the following months his imagination,  
when he is most inspired, moves once more  
habitually among mossy woodland ways and by  
enchanted waters, the immense advance in robust-  
ness of artistic and intellectual sinew which dis-  
tinguishes the poet of the *Nightingale* and *Autumn*  
from the poet of *Endymion* was gained chiefly  
in that summer of enlarged ideals and experience,  
of which the mountain vision was a small but a  
significant and symbolical part.





IV

GABRIELE  
D'ANNUNZIO



## IV

### GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

**M**AZZINI, the most prophetic figure of the nineteenth century, declared in a famous passage his confidence in the European mission of his country. 'The Third Italy,' destined to be born of the long agony of the struggle with Austria without and the papacy within, was not merely to be a nation, restored to unity and independence; it was to intervene as an original voice in the complex harmony of the European nationalities, contributing of its own inborn genius something distinctive and unique. 'We believe devoutly that Italy has not exhausted her life in the world. She is called to introduce yet new elements in the progressive development of humanity, and to live with a third life. It is for us to begin it.' Were Mazzini to return to life to-day, how far would he regard his prophecy as fulfilled? Beyond question his lofty idealism would find much to disapprove and to regret. He would find a Third Italy, which has committed grave excesses in the name of her recovered nationhood. But he would also find a nation whose present rulers have shown more capacity

for Mazzinian internationalism than any other European government. And he would find, also, in the Third Italy, a real renaissance, a genuine rebirth of genius and power, and this in ways so individual as to justify in a rare degree the anticipation that Italy would give something vitally her own to the new Europe. Open any serious Italian book to-day, and you will note a kind of intellectual concentration, a girding up of the loins of speech and thought, in striking contrast with the loose-tongued volubility of most Italian writing, in verse or prose, of the mid-nineteenth century. You note also a new tone of critical mastery and conscious equality. Italy in the last century was still the 'woman-people,' the pathetic beauty, languid still after the gentle torpor of two centuries, and whose intellectual life, with some brilliant isolated exceptions, faintly reflected that of the more masculine nations north of the Alps. To-day she has not only critically mastered all that Europe has to give, she sits in judgment upon us, and the judgment she pronounces has again and again been of that fruitful kind which disposes of old difficulties by revealing a larger law. Benedetto Croce, who in his review, the *Critica*, brings the literature of Europe, weighed and measured, to his reader's doors, has in his original philosophic work subjected her philosophic systems to a searching revision, and has succeeded in some measure to their authority.<sup>1</sup> A thinker less known, even to cultivated Italians,

<sup>1</sup> Much of this paragraph is repeated in substance from an article, by the writer, on 'The Higher Mind of Italy,' in the *Manchester Guardian*, 15 March 1920.



Aliotta, has surveyed in a book of singular penetration and philosophic power, the 'idealistic reaction against science' in the nineteenth century. And when we look to creative literature, we find in this Third Italy, together with a profusion of those fungoid growths of which the modern age has in the West been everywhere prolific, a group of poets, of powerful temperament and dazzling gifts, to whom no predecessor, in Italy or elsewhere, offers more than a distant resemblance. One of these, after pouring forth poems, dramas, novels, in prodigal abundance for thirty years, became the most vociferous, and possibly the most potent, of the forces that drove Italy into the war, and was until lately the idol of the whole Italian race. Even to-day, after the sorry collapse of his adventure, the man in whom Europe, irritated and impatient, sees only a sort of Harlequin-Garibaldi, impudent where his predecessor was sublime, and florid where he was laconic, is still, for multitudes of his countrymen, the hero-poet who took the banner of *Italianità* from the failing or treacherous hands of diplomats and statesmen, and defended it against the enemy without and the enemy within, with the tenacity of maturity and the ardour of youth. Certainly, one who is beyond all rivalry the most adored poet, in any country, of our time, who has fought for Italy with tongue and pen and risked his life in her service, and whose personality might be called a brilliant impressionist sketch of the talents and failings of the Italian character, reproducing some in heightened but veracious illumination, others in glaring caricature or paradoxical distortion—such a man, as a

national no less than as a literary force, claims and deserves close study.

Before entering, however, upon the detail of his life and work, let me assist our imagination of Gabriele d'Annunzio by quoting from the vivid description given by Mr. James Bone of a meeting with him at Venice in the summer of 1918. The poet, fifty-six years old, was then at the height of his renown; Fiume was still unthought of. His great exploit of flying over Vienna and dropping leaflets inviting her in aureate imagery to make peace was on every tongue. The gondoliers took off their hats as they passed his house on the Grand Canal, and he had to register all his letters to prevent their being abstracted as souvenirs. Mr. Bone was talking with the airmen at an aerodrome on one of the islands in the lagoons; when 'Conversation died instantly as an airman, very different from the others, came hurrying towards us a rather small, very quick, clean-cut figure, wearing large smoked glasses and white gloves with the wrists turned down. . . . The nose was rather prominent, complexion not dark but marked a little, the whole profile very clear, making one think not of a Renaissance Italian but of a type more antique, an impression accentuated by his rather large, beautifully shaped ear, very close to the head. The body denied the age that was told in the face, for all its firmness. One's first impression was of a personality of extraordinary swiftness and spirit still at full pressure, remorselessly pursuing its course "in hours of insight willed." . . . The whole surface of d'Annunzio's personality suggested a rich, hard fineness, like

those unpolished marbles in old Italian churches that gleam delicately near the base where the worshippers have touched them, but above rise cold and white as from the matrix. . . . There was something of the man of fashion in the way he wore his gloves, and in his gestures, but nothing one could see of the national idol aware of itself.' <sup>1</sup>

## I

The soldier-poet-man-of-fashion, who wore his fifty-six years thus lightly, was born, in 1862, at Pescara, the chief—almost only—town of the Abruzzi, then one of the wildest and rudest provinces of Italy. Its valleys, descending from the eastern heights of the Apennines to the Adriatic, were inhabited by an almost purely peasant population—a hardy, vigorous race, tenacious of their primitive customs, and little accessible to cultural influences. The Church enjoyed their fanatical devotion, but only at the price of tacitly accepting many immemorial pagan usages disguised by an unusually transparent veil of Catholic ritual; while the Law occasionally found it expedient to leave a convicted murderer (as in the *Figlia di Iorio*) to be executed by an angry multitude according to the savage methods their tradition prescribed. The little haven of Pescara—one of the few on Italy's featureless Adriatic coast—was the centre of a coasting traffic with the yet wilder Dalmatian seaboard, a traffic which like all ancient sea-faring, pursued its economic

<sup>1</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 12 September 1918.

aims in an atmosphere of superstitious observance, mystical, picturesque, and sometimes cruel. In the poetic autobiography ('The Soul's Journey') which occupies the first *Laude* (1903), d'Annunzio sketches vividly his boyhood's home in this Abruzzan country overlooking the sea. Of the persons who composed this home, of family affections, we have only momentary retrospective glimpses. We hear of the father, long dead when he wrote, from whom he derived his iron-tempered muscles; and of the mother, who gave him his insatiable ardour of will and desire. The three sisters seem to have been like him; the face of the second sister resembled his own 'mirrored in a clear fountain at dawn.' All that stood between them, he says, was their innocence and his passion. There was, too, an old nurse, to whom in her serene old age, when she had retired to a mountain hamlet, the poet addressed some tenderly beautiful stanzas, contrasting his own stormy career with her idyllic peace as she 'spins the wool of her own flocks while the oil holds out.'<sup>1</sup>

But of household drama, such as dominates the experience of most children, little seems to have existed for this child. Certainly it vanishes completely, in the retrospect of the man of forty, beside the drama enacted with prodigious intensity of colour, animation, and passion, by his imperious senses. The contrast is here acute between d'Annunzio and his co-heir of the Carduccian tradition, Pascoli, whose poignant memories of childhood, instead of being effaced by the energy

<sup>1</sup> Dedication of *Il Poema Paradisiaco* (1892).



of his sense-life, permeate it through and through, giving a 'deep autumnal tone' to almost every line he wrote. He spoke in later life of his 'profound sensuality' as a gift which had brought him poetic discoveries denied to colder men, and this is no doubt true if by 'sensuality' we understand, as we ought, that d'Annunzio is prodigally endowed with all the senses, that eye and ear feast on the glory and the music of the world and live in its teeming life, that his lithe body thrills with the zest of motion, that imagery is the material of his thinking and the stuff of his speech; and that the passion of sex, so acutely and perilously developed in him, is just one element in this prodigal endowment of his entire sense-organism, itself a main source of the artistic splendour of his work. In the early pages of the *Viaggio* we see the young boy drinking in with a kind of intoxication the simple sights and sounds of the farm—the rhythmic fall of the flails on the threshing-floor, the pouring of the whey from the churn, the whirr of the spool in the loom, the scampering of wild ponies with streaming manes over the hillside; or again, out at sea, the gorgeous scarlet or gold sails scudding before the wind, each with its symbolic sign. Even the inanimate world became for his transfiguring senses alive; 'it was a lying voice,' he cries, 'that declared that Pan is dead.' The mere contrasts of things, the individual self-assertion shown by a tree, for instance, in not being a rock, produced in him an excitement analogous to that which made Rupert Brooke, in his own words, 'a lover' of all kinds of common things



for being just definitely and unmistakably what they were. So that a conception apparently so thin and abstract as 'difference' can assume for him the shape and potency of an alluring divinity: 'Diversity,' he cries, 'the siren of the world! I am he who love thee!'

And then, with adolescence, came the passion of sex; for d'Annunzio no shy and gradual discovery, but a veritable explosion, before which all obstacles, moral and material, vanished into air. He tells it with the frankness of a child of the South, and the self-conscious importance of an egoist for whom the events of his own physical history could only be fitly described in terms of epic poetry, with its contending nationalities and ruined or triumphant kings. 'O flesh!' he cries, 'I gave myself up to thee, as a young beardless king gives himself up to the warrior maid who advances in arms, terrible and beautiful. She advances victorious, and the people receive her with rejoicing. Astonishment strikes the gentle king, and his hope laughs at his fear.'<sup>1</sup> And from the first this new passion allies itself with the rest of his sense-organism, irradiating eye and ear and imagination, 'giving to every power a double power,' as Biron says in *Love's Labour's Lost*. 'Thou wast sometimes as the grape pressed by fiery feet, O flesh, sometimes as snow printed with bleeding traces; I seemed to feel in thee the twisting of trodden roots, and to hear the far-off grinding of the axe upon the whetstone.' The young erotic was already growing towards that observant psychologist of eroticism

<sup>1</sup> *Laus Vitæ*, 232 f.

who pervades so many gorgeous but repulsive pages of his novels.

He was also growing, more slowly and as yet invisibly, to other and more notable things. In the first published poems of the boy of eighteen, and the second, *Canto Novo*, two years later, there is not much more than the reflexion of this intense and pervading 'sensuality' (in the large meaning above indicated), in a speech moulded upon the diction and rhythms of Carducci. The great master, then at the height of his fame, had still to do much of his most splendid work. D'Annunzio, who never ceased to revere him, was to become his principal inheritor; but the heir added so much of his own to the bequest that he can only at the outset be regarded as his disciple. The elder poet's influence was in any case entirely salutary. The classical severity and nobility of style which distinguish the *Rime Nove* and the *Odi Barbare* from the florid and facile romantic verse of the day, contributed to temper the dangerous luxuriance of d'Annunzio, and to evoke the powers of self-discipline and tenacious will which lay within; while Carducci's exultation in radiance and clarity, his noonday view of life, his symbolic sun-worship and his hatred of all twilight obscurantism and moonlight nebulosity, equally enforced the more virile strain in d'Annunzio, the 'stalk of carle's hemp' which, far more truly than in Burns, underlay the voluptuous senses.

This background of harder and tougher nature was already manifested when d'Annunzio, a few years later, turned to tell in prose some stories of his native province. There is little in the

*Novelle della Pescara* of love, less of luxury or refinement; we see the Abruzzan village folk at feud, fanatical and ferocious, the women inciting the men, the Church in its most ceremonial robes blandly but helplessly looking on. *The Idolators* tells how the men of a certain village plan to set the bronze statue of their saint upon the church altar of another neighbouring village. They assemble at night and march through the darkness with the image on a cart. In the other village the men await them in force, and a savage battle takes place in the church, ending in the rout of the assailants with much slaughter, and the ignominious mutilation of the image of their patron saint. And all this grim matter is told in a style admirably strong and terse, bold and sharp in outline, direct and impersonal in statement, untouched by either delicate feeling or weak sentimentality. D'Annunzio's sensuality asserts itself still, as always; but it appears here as a Rubens-like joy in intense impressions; now a copper-coloured storm sky, now a splash of blood, betrays his passion for the crude effects of flame and scarlet, most often where they signify death or ruin. He imagines voluptuously as always, but his voluptuousness here feeds not in the lust of the flesh, but in the lust of wounds and death. When he describes the fighting in the church, he spares you as little as Homer; you are not told merely that a man was stabbed, you are made to see the blade shear away the flesh from the bone. His men are drawn with the same hard, pungent stroke, and a visible relish for scars, gnarled features, frayed dress,

and all the maimings and deformities, which tell not of weakness or decay, but of battles recent or long ago, the blows and buffets received in the tug with fortune. There is little trace of sybarite effeminacy in the painting of old Giacobbe, for instance, the leader of the insurgents, a tall, bony man, with bald crown and long red hairs on nape and temples, two front teeth wanting, which gave him a look of senile ferocity, a pointed chin covered with bristles, and so forth.

D'Annunzio was intrinsically of the Abruzzan race ; the tough hardy fibre of the peasant folk was his ; and it was the deep inborn attachment to his blood and kin which produced, twenty years later, his greatest work, as a like attachment lifted Mr. Shaw, almost at the same moment, to the rare heights of *John Bull's Other Island*. But much had to happen to the young provincial before he could thus discover to the full the poetry of his province.

## II

In the early eighties d'Annunzio had come to Rome. The little circle of young Carduccians in the capital welcomed the poet's brilliant disciple, who was soon to outdistance them all in sheer splendour of literary gift. More important, however, than any literary or personal influence—for his hard encasing shell of egoism made him extraordinarily immune to the intrusion either of alien genius or of friendship or love—was the deep impression made upon the young Abruzzan by the splendour, the art glories, and above all the historic import of Rome. 'The Abruzzi gave



d'Annunzio the sense of *race*,' says an excellent critic, 'Rome gave him the sense of *history*.' The magical effect of Rome had hitherto been rendered most vividly in the poetry of other peoples, to whom it was a revelation, or a fulfilment of long aspiration, of the 'city of their soul,' in Goethe's *Roman Elegies*, *Childe Harold*, or *Adonais*. How overwhelming to an imaginative Italian the sight and living presence of Rome could be may be judged from the magnificent *Ode* of Carducci. The Englishman who is thrilled as he stands in the Forum, or by the mossy bastions of our own Roman wall, may faintly apprehend the temper of a citizen of the 'Third Italy' who felt his capital, newly won from the Popes, to be once more in living continuity with the city of Cæsar. Both the nobility and the extravagance of Italian national feeling have their root in this sense of continuity with antique Rome, and this is to be remembered in estimating the perfervid *Italianità* of d'Annunzio, the most striking example both of the sublime idealism and of the childish extravagance which it is able to inspire.

The work of the next years abounded in evidence of the spell which Rome had laid upon his sensuous imagination. He poured forth novels and poems, both charged with an oppressive opulence of epicurean and erotic detail, but saved for art by the clear-cut beauty of the prose, and by frequent strokes of bold and splendid imagination.

Andrea Sperelli in *Il Piacere* (1889) and Tullio Hermil in *L'Innocente* (1892), are virtuosos in æsthetic as well as in erotic luxury, and the two allied varieties of hedonism reflect and enforce



one another. Sperelli is artist and connoisseur, of unlimited resources and opportunities, and neither he nor his mistress could think love tolerable in chambers not hung with precious tapestry and adorned with sculptured gold and silver vessels, the gift of queens or cardinals of the splendour-loving Renaissance. No doubt there is irony in the picture too ; the native stamina in d'Annunzio resists complete assimilation to the corrupt aspects of the luxury he describes, and he feels keenly the contrast between the riotous profusion of the 'new rich' of the new Rome and the heroism and hardships of the men of the *Risorgimento* who had won it.

The poetry of this period is less repellent because its substance, though not definitely larger or deeper, is sustained and penetrated by the magic of a wonderfully winged and musical speech. His *Elegie Romane* (1892)—a rare case of his emulating another poet—are inferior in intellectual force to Goethe's, which yet have as lyrics an almost pedestrian air in comparison with the exquisite dance of the Italian rhythms. Here is one of d'Annunzio's, in some approach to the original elegiacs. He has listened to a service in St. Peter's :

Thro' the vaulted nave, that for ages has gathered so vast a

Human host, and of incense harboured so vast a cloud,

Wanders the chorus grave from lips invisible. Thunders

Break from the organ at times out of its hidden grove.

Down thro' the tombs the roar reverberates deep in the  
darkness ;

The enormous pillars seem to throb to the hymn.

High enthroned the pontifical priests watch, blessing the people.

At the iron gates angels and lions keep guard.

How majestic the chant ! From its large, long undulations

Rises one clear voice with a melodious cry.

The voice mourns, alone ; in his cold vault does he not hear it,  
Palestrina ? Alone the voice mourns, to the world  
Uttering a sorrow divine. Does the buried singer not hear it ?  
Does not his soul leap up, bright on the heights of heaven ?  
Even as a dove makes wing aloft unto golden turrets ?  
The voice mourns, alone ; mourns, in the silence, alone.

The sonnets of the *Isottèo* and *Chimera* (1885-8) show a concentration rare in the later history of the Italian sonnet. And any reader who thinks d'Annunzio incapable of writing of love without offence may be invited to try the charming idyll of Isaotta Guttadauro. Scenery and circumstances, to be sure, are sumptuous and opulent as usual. The simple life and homely persons traditional in idyll are remote ; but poetry did not absolutely fly from Tennyson's touch when he turned from his Miller's and Gardener's daughters to put Maud in a Hall ; and neither does she retire from d'Annunzio's Isaotta, in her noble mansion. The lover stands at sunrise in the 'high hall garden' under her window and summons her in a joyous morning song to come forth. It is late autumn, the house is silent, but the peacocks perched on the orange trees hail the morning in their raucous tones. The situation is that of Herrick's May morning song to Corinna ; but though Herrick loved jewels and fine dresses not a little, the contrast is piquant between the country simplicity of his Devonshire maids and men, and the aristocratic luxury of Isaotta. 'Come, my Corinna, come ! Wash, dress, be brief in praying'—bids Herrick ; but no such summary toilette will serve the Italian. Isaotta will rise from her brocaded bed, and her white limbs will gleam in a marble bath, as her maid pours

amber-scented water on them, while the woven figures of the story of Omphale look on from the walls. At length Isaotta comes out on to her vine-wreathed balcony and playfully greets *messèr cantore* below. She is secretly ready, we see, to surrender, but makes a show of standing out for terms. They will wander through the autumnal vineyards, and if they find a single cluster still hanging on the poles, 'I will yield to your desire, and you shall be my lord.' So they set out in the November morning. The vineyards, lately so loud with vintage merriment and song, are now deserted and still. Not a cluster is to be seen. She archly mocks him: 'What, has subtle Love no power to give you eyes?' They meet peasant women going to their work, and one of them asks him, 'What seekest thou, fair sir?' And he replies: 'I seek a treasure.' A flight of birds rises suddenly across their path with joyous cries; they take it as a sign, and gaze at each other, pale and silent. Then unexpectedly he sees before him a vineyard flaming in full array of purple and gold, and a flock of birds making a chorus in its midst. 'O lady Isaotta, here is life!' I cried to her with rapt soul; and the chorus of songsters cried over our heads. I drew her to the spot, and she came as swift as I, for I held her firmly by the hand. Rosy was the face she turned away from me, but fair as Blanchemain's when she took the kiss of Lancelot, her sovran lover, in the forest. 'O Lady, I keep my pact; for you I pluck the fatal untouched cluster.' Then she gave me the kiss divine.

## III

The last word of the *Isaotta* idyll—*sovrumano*—rendered above ‘divine,’ was an early symptom of a development of formidable significance in the prose and poetry of d’Annunzio during the next twenty years. The ‘Superman’ had not yet been discovered when he was a boy, but the spirit to which *sovrumanità* appeals had from the first run in his blood. His passion for sensation, for strong effects, for energy, even for ferocity and cruelty, was the concomitant of a genius that strove to shatter obstacles, to bend others to its will, and reshape its experience, as the opposite genius of Pascoli submissively accepted experience, hearing in all its vicissitudes reverberations of the mournful memories in which his soul was steeped. When d’Annunzio accordingly, in the early nineties, discovered the work of Nietzsche, he experienced that liberation which comes to every man who meets with a coherent exposition of the meaning of his own blind impulses, and a great new word for his confused and inarticulate aims. In Nietzsche he found a mind more congenial to him perhaps than any other he had known, more even than that of his master Carducci, but, unlike his, congenial mainly to what was most perilous and ill-omened in himself. He loftily admitted the German his equal, a great concession, and when Nietzsche died, in 1900, wrote a noble dirge ‘to the memory of a destroyer,’—of the *Barbaro enorme* ‘who lifted up again the serene gods of Hellas on to the vast gates of the Future.’



When d'Annunzio wrote these words the Hellenic enthusiasms, nourished by his acute sense of beauty in a nature utterly wanting in the Hellenic poise, had won, partly through Nietzsche's influence, an ascendancy over his imagination which made it natural for him to render the Superman in Hellenic terms. The serene gods of Hellas symbolized for him the calmness of absolute mastery, of complete conquest, all enemies trampled under foot or flung to the eternal torments of Erebus. This mood detached him wholly from Shelley, and Byron, and the young Goethe. They had gloried in Prometheus, the spirit of man struggling against supreme deity on its Olympian heights, and finally overthrowing it; whereas d'Annunzio, like the riper Goethe, adores the secure serenity of Olympus. 'O Zeus, Father of Serene Day, how much fairer than the chained and howling Iapetid seemed in thy eyes the silent mountain and its vast buttresses fresh with invisible springs.' And besides Prometheus, Zeus has another enemy, Christ—the foe of beauty, and lord of the herd of slaves with their slave-morality of pity and submission. 'O Zeus, he cries, I invoke thee, awaken and bring on the Morrow! Make the fire of heaven thy ploughshare to plough the Night! Thou only canst purify Earth from its piled-up filth.'

We are not to look in all this for even so much of definite ethical or philosophic content as we find in Nietzsche. If Nietzsche was a poet imagining in philosophic terms rather than a philosopher, d'Annunzio was hardly capable of abstract thought at all. On the other hand, Nietzsche could still



less rival d'Annunzio in creative faculty, and the series of d'Annunzian characters inspired or touched by the spirit of Nietzschean *sovrumanità* may be set against the richer intellectual and spiritual substance of *Zarathustra*. No doubt this influence was in the main disastrous for him; Nietzsche's heady draught intoxicated his brain with visions of colossal and ruthless power, begetting images of supermen and superwomen magnificent in stature and equipment, in the glory of their flame-like hair, and the crystalline beauty of their speech, but wholly unreal and impossible. Nevertheless, there were fortunate moments when the vision of power was constrained by a human and moving story to work within the limits of humanity. And these moments, though few, atoned for much splendid futility.

Moreover, his vision of power came to include, at moments, the bridling of his own infirmities. There was always the making of a soldier in the Abruzzan before he became one. He was capable of an asceticism amazing to those who know only the hothouse atmosphere of his novels. Some of his most sumptuous prose and verse was poured forth in the naked seclusion of monastic cells, or in wild peasant houses far from civilization; and only the most iron industry could have achieved the enormous bulk of his work.<sup>1</sup> Hence he can put into the mouth of Claudio Cantelmo, in the *Vergini*, these evidently autobiographic words: 'After subduing the tumults of youth, I examined whether perchance . . . my will could, by choice and exclusion,

<sup>1</sup> Gargiulo, *Gabriele d'Annunzio* (1912), to whose account of the poet's *sovrumanità* the present essay is much indebted.

extract a new and seemly work of its own from the elements which life had stored up within me.' There is a glimpse here of a finer psychological and a deeper ethical insight than we often find in d'Annunzio, and it might have led a man of richer spiritual capacity to a loftier poetry than he was ever to produce.

But on the whole the clue thus hinted was not followed up, and the tough nerve which might have nourished the powerful controlling will of a supreme artist, often served only to sustain those enormities of the ferocious and the grandiose which make dramas like *Gloria* and *La Nave* mere examples of the pathology of genius.

We touch here the crucial point. For these extravagances were not mere momentary aberrations. They were but the more pronounced manifestations of fundamental deficiencies in the man, which in their turn impoverish and dwarf the poet. D'Annunzio, in one word, is wanting in humanity; and because of his shallow and fragmentary apprehension of the human soul, his vision of power and beauty discharges itself in barren spectacles of brute energy and material splendour, for which he cannot find psychological equivalents in grandeur or loveliness of character. Shakespeare's huge personalities—Othello, Lear, Antony—are human in every trait, however much they transcend our actual experience of men. D'Annunzio tries to make violent actions and abnormal passions produce the illusion of greatness of soul, and disguises his psychological poverty by the sustained coruscations of his lyric speech.

In the meantime novels and poems and dramas

poured forth. The prolific later nineties saw the famous novel *Fuoco* (1900), a picture of Venetian splendour as gorgeous as that of Rome in *Piacère*, but touched with the new joy in power; and the dramas *Sogno d'un Mattino di Primavera* (1897), *Gioconda*, and *Città Morta* (1898). In the last named d'Annunzio's vision of power assumes an audacious and original form. It is here the power of the vanished past to stretch an invisible hand across the centuries and strike down youth and life. The result is a tragedy that reproduces as nearly as a modern dramatist may the horror excited in ancient spectators by the doom of the House of Atreus. Nothing indeed could be less Greek than the structure and persons of the play. Leonardo, a young archæologist, is excavating in the ruins of Mycenæ. With him are his sister, Beata Maria, and their friends Alessandro and Anna his wife, a cluster of human flowers, full of living charm and sap, transplanted into the 'dead city.' But the dead city is not merely dead; it is mysteriously fraught with the power of the vanished past to control the present and the future. Its mouldering ruins are the arena of a struggle between Death and Life, in which death triumphs and life receives the mortal blow. Leonardo, obsessed with the *Oresteia*, is haunted at night by visions of terrific blood-stained figures, and has no thoughts by day but of penetrating the secrets of their tombs. Alessandro, full of the joy of life, seeks to detach him from these preoccupations. 'I hoped he would have come with me and gathered flowers with those fingers of his which know nothing but stones and dust,'

and he is drawn to Beata Maria, herself the very genius of glowing youth, 'the one live thing, says her friend Anna, in this place, where all is dead and burnt . . . it is incredible what force of life is in her . . . if she were not, none of us could live here, we should all die of thirst.' 'When Beata Maria speaks, he who hears forgets his pain, and believes that life can still be sweet.' She herself is devoted to the brother whose passion seems to estrange him so far from what she loves. She shares his Hellenic ardour, and innocently recites Cassandra's prophecy in the *Agamemnon*, with Cassandra's wreath on her golden locks, of 'an evil, intolerable to the nearest kin, and irreparable, preparing in this house.' Anna, struck with mysterious fear, stops her; but the ominous words have been spoken, and foreshadow a real doom. Beata Maria, the unconscious Cassandra, will suffer Cassandra's fate. The indestructible virus of the dead city will poison the glory of youth. The incestuous passion which desolated the House of Atreus is not extinguished in the crumbling dust of their tombs. A horrible infection seizes Leonardo. He struggles vainly with an impure passion for his sister. In only one way can his love be purified, a way grievous for him, and yet more grievous for her. She must die; and he slays her among the tombs of the 'dead city' which has thus again laid upon the living its mortal hand.

The conclusion outrages our feelings, and betrays d'Annunzio's glaring deficiency in sympathetic power. Whatever pity we feel for Leonardo in his miserable plight is dispelled by his cynical



purchase of the purity of his own emotions at the price of his innocent sister's death. Here, as in other cases, d'Annunzio's fundamental want of passion, and the strain of hard egoism which pervaded the movements of his brilliant mind, gravely injured his attempts in tragic poetry. Death was doubtless the only solution; but it must be another death—one that would have saved the 'purity' of Leonardo's emotions by ending them altogether. Leonardo, however, has the ruthless energy of the Superman, and the innocent life must be crushed that he may rise.

#### IV

Yet d'Annunzio's vision of power, his appetency of enormous and abnormal things, was now to assume a new form. The grandiose dream of the Superman expands into the dream of the Supernation. The discovery of Rome had taught him something of the pride of citizenship, and more than the nascent pride of nationality. But in the last year of the century he underwent an experience which turned this nascent emotion into a passion, and the poet himself into a prophet and preacher in its service, an 'announcer' as he was fond of saying, of the cause and creed of *Italianità*.

He had as yet seen nothing of Europe beyond the Alps. In 1900 he made an extensive tour, but in no tourist spirit. An Italian had no need to go abroad for beauty of nature or of art, and d'Annunzio's keen eyes were turned in quite other directions—to the great Transalpine nations with their vast resources and their high ambitions; and he measured their several capacities for success



in the conflict which he, among the first, saw to be impending. He was impressed by the threatening growth of Germany, and by 'the extraordinary development of race-energy' in England. Everywhere the force of nationality was more vehement than ever before. 'All the world is stretched like a bow, and never was the saying of Heracleitos more significant: "The bow is called Bios (life), and its work is death."'

But where was Italy in this universal tension of the national spirit? Where was *her* strung bow? How was *she* preparing to hold her own with the great progressive nations of the North? D'Annunzio flung down these challenging questions in his eloquent pamphlet, *Della coscienza nazionale* (1900). To the foreign observer the trouble with Italy did not seem to be defective ambition. She had rather appeared to take her new rôle as a great Power too seriously, blundering into rash adventures abroad when she ought to have been spreading the elements of civilization at home. But d'Annunzio had seen the race for empire in the North, and his call to Italy was the call of an imperialist; a call for unity of purpose, for concentration of national wealth and strength in the interest of a greater Italy, mistress of the Adriatic, if not of the Mediterranean. It was the beginning of a new phase of d'Annunzio's career. He was henceforth a public man, whose voice, the most resonant and eloquent then to be heard in Italy, counted, as poetic voices so rarely do, in the direction of public affairs. He entered Parliament, a proclaimed disciple in policy of Crispi, the Italian Bismarck.

How did these enlarged ideals affect d'Annunzio's work in poetry? In part, as has been hinted, disastrously. The enlarged ideals lent themselves with perverse ease, in a mind already obsessed with *sovrumanità*, to a mere megalomania, a rage for bigness, only more mischievous in practice, and nowise better as literature, because it was conveyed in terms of navies and transmarine dominions. He had already in his fine series of *Odi Navali* (1893) fanned to some purpose the naval ambitions of his country. He now sounded a loftier note, suited to the vaster horizons of an Italian Mediterranean. These, for instance, are some stanzas from the opening hymn or prayer prefixed to his colossal naval tragedy, *La Nave* (1908):

O Lord, who bringest forth and dost efface  
 The ocean-ruling Nations, race by race,  
 It is this living People by Thy grace  
     Who on the Sea  
 Shall magnify Thy name, who on the Sea  
 Shall glorify Thy name, who on the Sea  
 With myrrh and blood shall sacrifice to Thee  
     At the altar-prow.  
 Of all Earth's oceans make Our Sea, O Thou!  
     Amen!

The fourth book of the *Laudi* is a lyric celebration in this spirit, of the Tripoli adventure 'beyond the sea.' But megalomania was happily not the whole result. The older and deeper instincts planted or quickened in d'Annunzio by his earlier experience—the feeling for race and for historic continuity—coalesced with the new and vehement passion of nationality, communicating to it, in moments of vision, something of their human intimacy, and undergoing in their turn

an answering enlargement of range and scope. If his *Italianità* was something more significant than a resonant cry for more ships and territory, it was because it drew warmth and insight from the home sentiment for his Abruzzan province deep-rooted in the poet's heart ; while the Abruzzan province, in its turn, was seen in the larger and grander setting of the Italian people and the Roman race, but without the distorting nimbus of megalomaniac dreams. This fortunate harmony found expression chiefly in certain poems of the years shortly before and after the beginning of the new century, the golden period of d'Annunzio's production. To these years belong his two most notable attempts to give to Italy a tragic poetry built upon Italian history.

In the material for tragic poetry no country was richer, but it had been left to the genius of foreign dramatists to give world-wide fame to the stories of Romeo and Juliet, Beatrice Cenci, and Torquato Tasso. Alfieri, the greatest of Italian tragic poets, had devoted his austere art almost solely to classical subjects ; and his *Don Garzia* and *Congiura de' Pazzi*, with Niccolini's *Arnaldo da Brescia*, Monti's *Galeotto Manfredi*, and Manzoni's *Conte di Carmagnola* and *Adelchi* stood almost alone, as remarkable Italian tragedies on Italian themes. In the story of Francesca of Rimini, d'Annunzio found to his hand a native tragic subject of the first order, not yet touched by a tragic poet of genius, Italian or other. That it had been made his own by the supreme poet of Italy hardly disturbed d'Annunzio, deeply as he revered the poet whose words, in the fine phrase

of his Dante Ode, clothed Italy like the splendour of day. He was not going to challenge comparison with Dante's marmoreal brevity. And the poet of Pescara had some title to regard this story of the adjacent Adriatic sea-board of Rimini and Ravenna, as his by right. But the story itself has also exerted its moderating control upon the natural prodigiosity of his invention, so that in his Franciscan tragedy it is possible to recognize a general conformity to traditional technique.

It is even possible that Shakespeare's handling of his Italian tragedy may have afforded a hint. The ruin of Romeo and Juliet results from the feud of the rival houses. The ruin of d'Annunzio's Francesca and Paolo is similarly rooted ultimately in the feud of Guelf and Ghibelline. Her father, a great Guelf captain, has sold her to the lord of Ravenna, as the price of support against the Ghibellines. But when her hand is thus plighted, she has already seen his brother Paolo, with his feminine beauty and luxuriant locks, pass under her window, and the seed of their passion is sown. Francesca has grown up 'a flower in an iron soil,' and love throughout is set in a frame of war. But she would be no d'Annunzian heroine if she did not respond to the call of life and light. When about to leave Rimini on her marriage she replies to the pleading of her devoted young sister who cannot live without her, 'I am going, sweet life, where thou canst not come, to a deep and solitary place, where a great fire burns without fuel.' Fire is d'Annunzio's haunting symbol for terrible and splendid things, a symbol, too, for the strange union of cruelty and beauty in his own mind and



art, and it does not here forecast only the Inferno flames in which she will move with Paolo so lightly before the wind. In the palace at Ravenna we see her among her ladies, chafing at her dull seclusion, while the Ghibelline siege rages without. A Florentine merchant displays his gorgeous wares before them, a feast of scarlet and gold. Presently Francesca has climbed to the tower where her husband's brothers are on guard. Bolts and arrows crash against the walls or through the loophole. A cauldron of Greek fire stands ready for use. Francesca, to the horror of the soldiers, fires it, and breaks into wild ecstasy at the 'deadly beauty' of this 'swift and terrible life.' A moment later a bolt pierces the curls of Paolo. She thinks he is wounded, and clasps his head. In that embrace he stammers the first word of love. 'They have not hit me, but your hands have touched me, and have undone the soul within my heart! . . .' *Francesca*: 'Lost! Thou art lost!' Thus, again, Francesca's fate, like Juliet's, is provoked by the irrelevant feud of parties without. But presently the same irrelevant feud thrusts the lovers apart. Paolo is sent as General of the Guelf forces to Florence. Francesca in his absence reads the Lancelot romance with her ladies. But Paolo, unable to endure his exile, posts back to Ravenna, and rushes to her chamber. The romance of Lancelot lies open on the lectern. The place where the reading stopped is marked; it is where Galeotto is urging Lancelot's suit upon Ginevra. They bend over the book together. The following dialogue replaces Dante's single pregnant line:



*Pa.* Let us read a page, Francesca !

*Fr.* Look at that swarm of swallows, making a shadow  
On the bright water !

*Pa.* Let us read, Francesca.

*Fr.* And that sail that is glowing like fire !

*Pa.* (*reading*). 'Assuredly,  
Lady,' says Galeotto, 'he does not dare,  
Nor will he ask ye anything of love,  
Being afraid, but I ask in his name, and if  
I did not ask, you ought to seek it, seeing  
You could in no wise win a richer treasure.'  
And she says—

(*drawing Francesca gently by the hand*)

Now do you read what she says,

Be you Ginevra.

*Fr.* (*reading*). And she says : 'Well I know it, and I will do  
What you command. And Galeotto said :  
Grammercy, lady ; I beg that you will give him  
Your love. . . .'

(*she stops*.)

*Pa.* Read further !

*Fr.* No, I cannot see

The words.

*Pa.* Read : 'Certainly . . .

*Fr.* Certainly,' she says,

'I give it him, but so that he be mine  
And I utterly his, and all ill things  
Made good' . . . Paolo, enough.

*Pa.* (*reading with a hoarse and tremulous voice*).

'Lady, he says, much thanks ; now in my presence  
Kiss him, for earnest of true love'—You, you !  
What says she now ? What now ?

(*Their pale faces bend over the book, so that their cheeks almost touch*.)

*Fr.* (*reading*). She says : 'Why should

He beg it of me ? I desire it more

Than you. . . .'

*Pa.* (*continuing with stifled voice*). 'They draw apart.

And the Queen sees

The Knight dare go no further. Then she clasps him  
About the chin, and with a long kiss kisses  
His mouth. . . .'

(*He kisses her in the same way. When their mouths separate  
Francesca reels, and falls back on the cushions*.)

Francesca !

*Fr.* (*with hardly audible voice*).

No, Paolo !

The sequel is too long drawn out, and is marred by the duplicity of all the persons concerned. Malatestino's sleuth-hound cunning brings about the husband's vengeance, but his strategy is animated only by ferocious hatred of the lovers, not by any care for justice. By his contrivance the rough soldier, who has never suspected his own wrongs, returns prematurely from the march, and thunders at the lovers' chamber door: 'Open, Francesca!' The wretched Paolo tries to escape through a trapdoor, but is dragged up by the hair to be slain. But Francesca rushes to clasp him, and the husband's sword pierces her. *Francesca da Rimini*, though a brilliant drama, with innumerable beauties of detail, misses, like the *Dead City*, the quality of great tragedy. Of the principal characters Francesca alone excites a fitful sympathy, while Paolo's effeminacy provokes a contempt which diminishes our compassion for the woman whose love he has won. These coward 'heroes' who leave their mistresses in mortal peril, or slay their sisters, or see their brides borne to execution in their place, seem to haunt the egoist imagination of the poet, to the grievous hurt of his work. Yet when all is said, *Francesca* is one of the most arresting, though dramatically by no means one of the best, plays produced in Europe during the first decade of the century.

If the *Francesca* owed much to the stimulus and the control of a great historic and literary tradition, the rarer beauty of *La Figlia di Iorio* (1904) was nourished on the old intimate passion for his Abruzzan race and home. In language the more moving, because in d'Annunzio so seldom

heard, he dedicated 'To the land of Abruzzi, to my Mother, to my Sisters, to my Brother in exile, to my Father in his grave, to all my Dead, to all my People between the Mountains and the Sea, this song of the ancient blood.' It betokened, indeed, no mere recurrence to the scenes and memories of his childhood, but a recovery, through them, of the more primitive sensibilities and sympathies which the complexities of an ultra modern culture had obscured or submerged. The shepherds and peasants of this 'pastoral tragedy' live and move in an atmosphere fanatically tense with the customs and beliefs of their catholicized paganism; but no believing poet ever drew the ritual of rustic unreason with more delicate sympathy, or rendered its wild prayers and incantations in more expressive and beautiful song. For the poetry is not exotic or imposed; like the songs of peasants in opera, it is found and elicited. The young shepherd, Aligi, is drawn into a kind of mystic relationship to Mila di Codra, a witch-maiden dreaded and abhorred over the whole countryside. But a bride has been chosen for him by his family, and the scene opens on the morning after their nominal bridal. Aligi's three sisters are seen kneeling before the old carved oak chest, choosing her bridal robes, and vying with each other in joyous morning carols. A band of scarlet wool is drawn across the open door, a crook and a distaff lean against it, and by the doorpost hangs a waxen cross as a charm against evil spells. Aligi looks on in dreamy distraction, his thoughts far away. The women of the neighbouring farms come in procession bearing gifts of

corn in baskets on their heads. An unknown girl follows in their train. Presently angry cries are heard in the distance. The reapers are in pursuit of Mila, whose spells have spoilt their harvest; they have seen her enter the house, and now they clamour at the door for her surrender. The frightened women tremble, but Mila has crouched down on the sacred hearth, whence it would be sacrilege to remove her, and Ornella, the youngest of the sisters, who alone secretly pities Mila, draws the bolts. The storm of menace grows louder, till Aligi, roused from his dreamy absorption by the taunts of the women, raises his hand to strike the suppliant on the hearth. Immediately the horror of his sacrilege seizes him, he implores her pardon on his knees, and thrusts his guilty hand into the flame. Then he hangs the cross above the door and releases the bolts. The reapers rush in, but seeing the cross, draw back in dismay, baring their heads. Aligi has saved his 'sister in Christ;' but his guilt is not effaced.

In the second Act, Aligi and Mila are living together, as brother and sister, in a mountain cavern. He would fain go with his flocks to Rome to seek dissolution of his marriage; but she knows that happiness is not for her, and she will not hurt him with her passionate love. But in his home they know only that the witch-maiden has decoyed the son away from his mother and his virgin bride; Ornella, the compassionate sister, is thrust out of doors, and now the father, who had returned home only after the reapers had gone, arrives at the mountain cavern in Aligi's



absence, and peremptorily summons Mila. She holds him defiantly at bay. He is about to seize her, when Aligi appears on the threshold. In the great scene which follows the Roman authority of the Abruzzan father over the son overpowers for the moment even the lover's devotion. Not softened by Aligi's humble submission, L'àzaro binds him, flogs him savagely, and turns upon Mila, now wholly in his power. At the moment when he has seized her Aligi breaks free, rushes upon his father, and kills him. The third act opens with the mourning for L'àzaro, in long-drawn lyric dirges. Then harsher and fiercer notes are heard, and Aligi, deeply penitent, appears black-robed and bound, borne by the angry mob to bid farewell to his mother before being led to the parricide's death. 'To call you mother is no more permitted me, for my mouth is of hell, the mouth that sucked your milk, and learnt from you holy prayers in the fear of God. Why have I harmed you so sorely? I would fain say, but I will be silent. O most helpless of all women who have suckled a son, who have sung him to sleep in the cradle and at the breast, O do not lift this black veil to see the face of the trembling sinner. . . .' The crowd tries to comfort her in its rough way, and the mother gives her son the bowl of drugged wine. Suddenly, confused cries are heard in the rear, and Mila breaks her way impetuously through the throng. 'Mother, sisters, bride of Aligi, just people, justice of God, I am Mila di Codra. I am guilty. Give me hearing!' They call for silence, and Mila declares that Aligi is innocent, and she the murderer. Aligi protests: 'Before



God thou liest.' But the crowd eagerly turns its fury upon the dreaded sorceress who owns her guilt, and the cry goes up: 'To the flames! To the flames!' Aligi protests again, but with growing faintness, as the deadening potion masters and confuses his brain; till at length, when the bonds have been transferred from his limbs to Mila's, he lifts up his hands to curse her. At this felon stroke her spirit breaks down. With a piercing shriek she cries: 'Aligi, Aligi, not thou, thou canst not, thou must not!' She is hurried away to the stake, only Ornella crying aloud: 'Mila, Mila, Sister in Jesus, Paradise is for thee,' while Mila herself, now full of the d'Annunzian exultation in glorious ruin, goes to her death crying: 'Beautiful Flame, Beautiful Flame!'

A brief résumé such as this inevitably brings into undue emphasis the melodramatic elements of the plot. Yet it is the most human and natural, as it is the most beautiful, of d'Annunzio's dramas. For the strangest things that happen in it are no mere projections of the poet's inspired ferocity or eroticism, as so often elsewhere, but are grounded in the real psychology of a primitive countryside. We see its fear, love, hatred, now mysteriously mastered by superstitious awe, now breaking rebelliously from its control, now wrought by its mystic power to else inexplicable excesses.

## V

But even the finest dramatic work of d'Annunzio makes clear that his genius is fundamentally lyrical. The greatest moments of *La Figlia di*

*Iorio* and *Francesca* are uttered in a vein which thrills and sings; while, on the other hand, these moments are often reached by summary short cuts, not by the logical evolution of great drama. And it is fortunate that while he continued to be allured by drama—giving in particular a very individual rendering of the tragedy of Phædra (1909)—d'Annunzio's most serious and ambitious poetry took the form of a festival of sustained song, the *Laudi* (1903 onwards). We have already quoted from the picture of his childhood drawn retrospectively, in the opening book, by the poet of forty. But these passages, though not at all merely episodic, hardly disclose the deeper sources of inspiration in this series of lyric cycles. 'Praises,' he calls them, 'Praises of the Sky, of the Sea, of the Earth, of its Heroes.' The glory of earth, and sea, and sky had drawn more majestic praise from the poet of the 123rd Psalm, though in his naïve Hebrew way he 'praised' only their Maker, not these 'wonderful works' themselves. D'Annunzio's 'praise' expresses simply the ravishment of acute sensibilities in the presence of the loveliness and sublimity of Nature and the heroism of man, an emotion Greek rather than Hebraic. Our poet is perhaps the least Hebraic of all modern poets of genius; and if his barbaric violence alienates him almost as completely from the Hellenic temper, he is yet akin to it by his inexhaustible joy in beauty. And in these years of the *Laudi* Hellas had become more than ever the determining focus about which his artistic dreams revolved, the magnet to whose lure even the barbarian in him succumbs. The first book, called

*Maia*, after the mother of Hermes, describes the poet's spiritual journey to the shrine of that god of energy and enterprise, whose Praxitelean image, the most magnificent expression of radiant virility ever fashioned by the chisel, had not long before been unearthed at Olympia. It is a journey of discovery, and d'Annunzio invokes for it the symbolism of the last voyage of the Dantesque Ulysses to seek the experience that lay 'beyond the sunset.' D'Annunzio turns his prow east, not west, but he, too, is daring peril in the quest of the unknown. A splendid Proem in *terza rima*, 'To the Pleiads and the Fates,' takes us to a rocky promontory by the Atlantic shore, where, on a flaming pyre, the helm of the wrecked ship of Ulysses is being consumed—the fiery consummation which crowns most of d'Annunzio's heroic careers. The modern venturer, too, must disdain safety, not like Galileo turning back into the secure haven, but fronting the pathless sea of fate with no anchor but his own valour. The sequel does not, it is true, accord completely with this Ulyssean vision. Symbolic imagery is interwoven, in this 'spiritual journey,' to the ruin of poetic coherence, with scenes from an actual voyage to Greece, leaves from a tourist's notebook, incidents of steamer-life, games and talk on board, sketches of fellow-passengers, the squalor and vice of Patras. Presently the ship reaches Elis, and then, as we enter the ruins of Olympia, the great past, human and divine, rises up before us. Pericles, Alcibiades, Themistocles obliterate the tourist memories, and the poet holds high colloquy with Zeus, and offers up a prayer, nine hundred

lines long, to Hermes—a lurid picture of the future of humanity, as d'Annunzio imagined it, wrought by the genius of Energy and Enterprise, Invention and Will; a future dominated by men of rocky jaw, who chew care like a laurel leaf, precipitate themselves on life, and impregnate it relentlessly with their purposes,—a significant image, for the d'Annunzian Hermes is fused with Eros (v. 2904). Eros was, indeed, indispensable, it might well be thought, to a quite satisfying d'Annunzian divinity. Yet in the fine colloquy with Zeus, which precedes, he touches a deeper note, rare with him, of desperate and baffled struggle with his own 'vast sensuality.' He begs Zeus for a sign. 'I am at war with many monsters, but the direst are those, ah me! which rise within me from the depths of my lusts.' 'Thou wilt conquer them,' replies Zeus, 'only if thou canst transform them into divine children.'

The monsters, nevertheless, continued to haunt his later art. But happier moods were interposed, when he found relief from their urgency in poetic communing with the passionless calm of Nature and of the dead things that cannot die.

Such moods in the second and third books of the *Laudi*, *Elettra* and *Alcione*, both mainly written before the *Maia*. The *Alcione*, in particular, is the record of a true 'halcyon' season—of hours or moments—in the poet's stormy course. It opens, indeed, with a savage denunciation—in perfectly handled *terza rima*—of the demons, within and without, that he has striven with. But now for a while he calls a truce:



Washed clean from human foulness in cool springs,  
I need but, for my festival, the ring  
Of the ultimate horizons of the earth.  
The breezes and the radiant air shall weave  
My new robe, and this body, purged from sin,  
Shall dance, light-hearted and alert, within !

Air and light and water do indeed play a large and significant part in this benign experience, and in the poetry which renders it. Water, we know, had peculiar allurements for his imagination ; but now the obsession of fleets and arsenals is overcome, and he looks out over the wide levels of the Arno mouth, where fishing boats with their hanging nets are seen, transfigured in the effulgence of the west, like cups or lilies of flame upon the water ; or 'on a June evening after rain,' when 'the gracious sky, tenderly gazing at her image in the earth she has refreshed, laughs out from a thousand mirrors.' The solidity of the material world seems to remain only in its most delicate and attenuated forms--the crescent moon 'slender as the eyebrow of a girl,' the lean boughs and tapering leaves of the olive, the seashore sand, not 'ribbed' as Wordsworth put it, but delicately traced like the palate or the finger-tip. The poet is visibly striving through these frail and delicate things to escape his obsession into a realm of spirit he divines, but cannot reach :

A slender wreath suffices, with few leaves,  
Lest it with weight or any shadow burden  
The gracious thoughts of dawn !

This is the language of no sensualist, but of a mystic. And d'Annunzio in these poems again and again approaches the poetic mysticism of



Wordsworth, and of Shelley and Dante. As he watches the dewy loveliness of evening, the earth seems to dissolve in the 'infinite smile,' which for Shelley 'kindled the universe';<sup>1</sup> and for the Italian it is the smile of Beatrice. In the child, who hardly exists for him before, the poet of pitiless virility now sees not only 'the father of the man,' but the soul implicitly aware of the Truth we only guess at:

The immense plenitude of life  
Is tremulous in the light murmur  
Of thy virginal breathing,  
And Man with his fervours and griefs.

Thou art ignorant of all, and discernest  
All the Truths that the Shadow hides.  
If thou questionest Earth, Heaven answers,  
If thou speak'st with the waters, the flowers hear.<sup>2</sup>

There are hints, perhaps reminiscences, of Wordsworth here; but d'Annunzio's more obvious affinity is doubtless with Shelley, whose Roman grave he saluted in an ode of lofty eulogy and sculptured grace.

The lyric eloquence of *Alcione* undoubtedly recalls the rush of Shelley's music and the æthereal liquidity of his style. Yet they touch across a gulf of profound disparity. D'Annunzio, for all his preoccupation with air and light and water, never, either as man or as artist, escapes the earth. The hard stuff of his egoism is never really transmuted in the flame of love; nor does the clear and delicate precision of his style ever really dissolve in radiant suffusion. D'Annunzio's

<sup>1</sup> *Beatitudine.*

<sup>2</sup> *Il Fanciullo.*

nature-world, like Shelley's, is peopled with imagined shapes, in which the myths of old Greece are created anew. But here too their divergence asserts itself. Shelley's Prometheus is not really earth-born, and his Asia is the hardly embodied symbol of the ideal passion of his own soul. While d'Annunzio's Triton and Dryad are recognizably akin to the sea or woodland life they spring from, hued like the salt deep, and full of the sap of earth. D'Annunzio is the greater artist, Shelley the finer and the rarer soul.

But these gracious idylls were, as has been hinted, an episode. Nature could not replace man; beyond 'earth' and 'sea' and 'sky,' the 'heroes,' and especially the heroes and heroic memories of Italy, called for his 'praise.' Here, he felt, was the home of his spirit. The gracious valley of Arno might be

A cradle of flowers and dreams and peace ;  
But the cradle of my soul  
Is the crashing chariot's furrow  
In the stone of the Appian Way.

The *Elettra*, the second book of the *Laudi*, is mainly devoted to the memories of these vanished glories. The resonant herald of the Third Italy wanders, for instance, among the 'Cities of Silence'—decayed, half grass-grown capitals of vanished dukes and extinct republics—Ferrara, Pisa, Pistoja; oldest and grandest of all, Ravenna, the 'deep ship's hull, heavy with the iron weight of empire, driven by shipwreck on the utmost bounds of the world.'<sup>1</sup> Of the sequence of lyrics on the great

<sup>1</sup> *Elettra* : *Città del Silenzio*.

enterprise of Garibaldi's 'Thousand,' *La Notte di Caprera*, it is enough to say that it is worthy of being put beside Carducci's Ode. After a quarter of a century Garibaldi's glory was no whit dimmed. On the contrary, Italians who knew how many gross blots defiled the Italy he had helped to win, saw Garibaldi as a figure of ideal splendour and purity on the further side of a foul morass. The bitter disillusion of such minds is powerfully painted in the moving piece: 'To One of the Thousand.' An old Garibaldian sailor brings his broken anchor-cable to the ship cordwainer to be mended. He looks on, sombre, dejected, silent, but thinking what he does not say; and his thoughts are like this:

The anchor-sheet is broken: let it be.  
 No hope of mending. Give it up, go home!  
 Turn into scourges, cordsman, and halter-nooses  
     Thy bitter twine.  
 Vilely supine lies the Third Italy,  
 A harlot-people put to basest uses,  
 And in her holy oak-grove's shadow, Rome  
     Pastures her swine.<sup>1</sup>

But Rome, the eternal City, could only obscure her destiny, not efface it; disillusion founded on her moments of self-oblivion was itself the vainest of illusions. That is the faith of the new Italian Renaissance, and d'Annunzio, the fiercest chastiser of her oblivious fatuities, attains his loftiest note of 'praise' in the Ode which prophetically arrays Rome in glory as the future centre of the embodied Power of Man.

It is based on the legend, told by Ovid,<sup>2</sup> of the

<sup>1</sup> *Elettra*: *A uno dei Mille*.

<sup>2</sup> *Fast.* iv. 291 f.

ship of the Great Mother, stranded in the Tiber mud, and drawn to shore by the Vestal Virgin Claudia Quinta. The opening stanzas tell the story—the dearth in the city, the Sibylline oracle's counsel to bring the image of the Mater Magna, the arrival of her ship in the river, the stranding in the mud, the vain efforts of the entire city to extricate it, until a Vestal Virgin, without an effort, draws it to bank. Then the poet interprets the symbolic legend :

So, O Rome, our Rome, in its time  
 . . . . .  
 Shall come from far-off seas,  
 Shall come from the deep, the Power  
 Wherein alone thou hast hope.  
 So, O Rome, our Rome, in its hour,  
 A heroic Maid of thy race  
 Shall draw Her within thy walls.  
 Not a vessel immovably stuck  
 In the slimy bed, not an image  
 Once worshipped in foreign fanes,  
 Shall her pure hand draw to the shore ;  
 But the Power of Man, but the holy  
 Spirit born in the heart  
 Of the Peoples in peace and in war,  
 But the glory of Earth in the glow  
 Divine of the human Will  
 That manifests her, and transfigures,  
 By works and deeds beyond number,  
 Of light, and darkness, of love  
 And hatred, of life and death ;  
 But the beauty of human fate,  
 The fate of Man who seeks  
 His divinity in his Creature.  
 Since in thee, as in an imperishable  
 Imprint shall the Power of Man  
 Take form and image ordained  
 In the market-place and the Senate  
 To curb the dishonour of Men.  
 . . . . .  
 O Rome, O Rome, in thee only,  
 In the circle of thy seven hills,

The myriad human discords  
Shall find their vast and sublime  
Unity. Thou the new Bread  
Shalt give, and speak the new Word.

All that men have thought,  
Dreamed and endured, achieved  
And enjoyed, in the Earth's vast bound,  
So many thoughts, and dreams,  
So many labours and pangs,  
And raptures, and every right won  
And every secret laid bare,  
And every book set open  
In the boundless circuit of Earth. . . .  
Shall become the vesture of thee,  
Thee only, O Rome, O Rome !  
Thou, goddess, Thou only shalt break  
The new Bread, and speak the new Word !

On this note, the climax of his boundless national faith, we will leave d'Annunzio. We are apt to think that the tide of humanity has ebbed decisively away from the city of the seven hills, and that wherever its sundered streams may be destined finally to flow together in unison, the Roman Forum, where the roads of all the world once met, will not be that spot. Yet a city which can generate magnificent, even if illusory, dreams is assured of a real potency in human affairs not to be challenged in its kind by far greater and wealthier cities which the Londoner, or the New Yorker, or even the Parisian, would never think of addressing in these lyrical terms.

Few men so splendidly endowed as d'Annunzio have given the world so much occasion for resentment and for ridicule. His greatest gifts lend themselves with fatal ease to abuse ; his ' vast sensuality ' and his iron nerve sometimes co-operate and enforce one another in abortions of erotics



and ferocity. But the same gifts, in other phases, become the creative and controlling elements of his sumptuous style. His boundless wealth of sensuous images provides the gorgeous texture of its ever changing woof. But its luxury is controlled by tenacious purpose; the sentences, however richly arrayed, move with complete lucidity of aim to their goal; the surface is pictorial, but the structure is marble. Thus this Faun of genius, as he seems under one aspect, compounded with the Quixotic adventurer, as he seems under another, meet in one of the supreme literary artists of the Latin race; a creator of beauty which, however Latin in origin and cast, has the quality that strikes home across the boundaries of race, and has already gone far to make its author not merely the protagonist of the Latin renaissance, but a European classic.



V

IS THERE A POETIC VIEW  
OF THE WORLD ?

## SUMMARY

View of the World, or 'World-view,' defined. Distinction of *religious* and *philosophical* World-views. The present essay attempts to define and describe a *poetic* World-view.—I. Character of poetic experience. Types of belief about Man and Nature to which it predisposes. Though rarely detached from religious or philosophical presumptions, it habitually modifies them, and the method here proposed is to study, in some salient examples, the character and direction of these modifications (p. 150).—II. (i) Modifications of *religious* World-views by the poetic inspirations of Personality and Love. HOMER. ÆSCHYLUS. DANTE (p. 156).—III. (ii) Modifications of *philosophical* World-views: (a) Materialistic schools. Epicureanism and LUCRETIVS. Poets of Pessimism: LEOPARDI (p. 169).—IV. (b) 'Objective idealisms.' Stoic pantheism and VERGIL. WORDSWORTH. SHELLEY. Philosophic doctrine of 'Nature' in WORDSWORTH, and in GOETHE. SPINOZA and GOETHE (p. 184).—V. (c) 'Subjective idealisms.' 'Mind' in the philosophers and in the poets of the age of WORDSWORTH. The poets subordinate (1) the rational to the emotional and imaginative factors of soul: WORDSWORTH, BLAKE, SHELLEY, and (2) moral categories to a good 'beyond good and evil.' Of this poetic ethic the most vital constituent is Love; and Love, comprehensively understood, will be an intrinsic element of every World-view won through poetic experience (p. 193).

## V

### IS THERE A POETIC VIEW OF THE WORLD?

‘VIEW of the World’ is a clumsy phrase for an idea which itself has for most of us an unattractive flavour of pedantry. This latter impression is hardly removed by a knowledge of the part which, under the neater and more expressive term *Weltanschauung*, it has played in German literary study. *Weltanschauung* is the indispensable final chapter without which no German biography, the confidential disclosure without which no German friendship, is complete. A *Weltanschauung* or ‘World-view,’ in its full scope, comprehends ideas about life of quite distinct categories; it touches metaphysics and science, ethics and æsthetics; it offers an answer to Faust’s question ‘what it is that at bottom holds the world together,’ but also to the practical questions, what is the end of action and how we ought to act.

Historically, we know, the answers to these questions occur, in great part, as successive steps in continuous or closely-connected processes of thought. But between these continuous processes yawn gulfs which no argument can bridge. From



Bacon through Hobbes to Locke we can trace something like a connected development. But between Hobbes and his contemporary Boehme there is a cleavage due not to bad reasoning on either side, but to a radical difference in the kind of experience from which the reasoning in the two cases set out. And the history of belief indicates that there are at least two types of elemental experience which thus generate ideas about the world, and to which two great classes of World-view in essence correspond. These may be distinguished as the *religious* and the *philosophical*. In the first, thought is dominated by the consciousness of a power or powers distinct from man, controlling his fate, protecting his country or his tribe, determining his moral code, his scheme of values, and his expectations after death. From the crudest fetishism and animism to the loftiest theism, a living relation to such a Power is the root fact from which the religious World-view takes its origin and derives its character.

On the other hand, we find a vast and complex body of conceptions of the world which do not originate in intercourse with a divine Power, or in the fear or hope which such a power may inspire, but in the effort to give a finally and universally valid account of experience.

Naturally, neither these nor any other type of World-view, if such there be, are mutually exclusive in substance and content. Religion may reach the conclusions of philosophy, and philosophy those of religion, each by a path strictly its own. Historically, the two attitudes to life have intimately interacted; and if the religious type has on the

whole shown less power of resistance to the penetration of ideas of the opposed type, on the other hand modern philosophy, in particular, has often built upon, and not seldom with, ideas first begotten not by speculative curiosity, but by the rapture or the agony of God-intoxicated or demon-haunted souls. The eternal war of Ormuzd and Ahriman still echoes in the Hebraic intensity of our distinction between good and evil ; and the visionary ecstasies of the mystics were of account in the evolution of philosophic pantheism. And, similarly, the edifices of theology have borrowed fortifying buttresses or indispensable pillars from ideas evolved by scientific reason or a purely secular interpretation of good. Aristotle, applied and interpreted by Aquinas, became one of the masters, not only of those who know, but of those who believe. Nevertheless, the two types have, on a comprehensive survey, stood distinctly apart ; and their ramifications appear to dominate between them the entire field of belief and speculative thought.

Is it possible, nevertheless, to distinguish a third type of 'World-view' analogous to these ? In other words, is there any third kind of experience, distinct from that of either religion or philosophy, yet involving an apprehension of reality comparable in originality, and possibly in importance, with theirs ? The present essay is based upon the view that such an experience is given in and by poetry.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The distinction of a religious, philosophic, and poetic World-view is based upon W. Dilthey : *Das Wesen der Philosophie : Weltanschauungslehre* (Hinneberg, *Kultur der Gegenwart*, I. vi).

## I

For the specific experience which comes to a poet through poetry, however it may be interwoven with religious or philosophic ideas, has a radically different psychological origin and character. It is equally intense and absorbing, but it is not determined by conscious relation to an outer power, and it seeks to express rather than to explain. It is neither transfigured fear or hope, nor yet a logical process. In the making of a poem there may be even a conscious detachment from actuality, and the poet may float free in a dream world, apparently without thought of the world which he inhabits. The poetic may well be thought to differ from the religious or the philosophic types of experience less in inducing any specific way of contemplating reality than in liberating us from the necessity or desire to contemplate it at all.

Yet it is certain that the poet's detachment, even in his most ethereal dream-flights, from reality, is only apparent. In all the spontaneous and seemingly arbitrary movement of his mind among its crowding ideal shapes, reality through his stored-up experience is at work, quietly weaving a thousand subtle filiations between the poem and the life of men at large. *Othello* is much farther from 'actuality' than the poor novel on which its story was based; but it is penetrated with the vision of life, of which Cinthio's tale caught so feeble and fugitive a glimpse. What distinguishes poetic from religious or philosophic apprehension is not that it turns away from reality, but that it lies open to and in eager watch for reality at doors

and windows which with them are barred or blind. The poet's soul resides, so to speak, in his senses, in his emotions, in his imagination, as well as in his conscious intelligence ; and we may provisionally describe poetic apprehension as an intense state of consciousness in which all these are vitally concerned. In so far as a particular outlook upon the world is founded upon a particular type of experience, a poet's World-view will be radically affected by his senses, emotions, imagination. The flower which Wordsworth contemplated on the bank or by the lake, and that other which Tennyson with his more curious scrutiny plucked from the crannied wall, could stir these poets' intellect and heart to the depths ; and their apprehension, as poets, of God and man, of Nature, of Duty, would have been different without it.

But in any case, it will be said, even if we grant that poetic experience tends to induce some way of regarding reality, it cannot possibly induce any constant or definable way, if elements of mind so infinitely diverse, so individual, as emotion and imagination, are vitally concerned in the process. That energizing of mind released from the control of actuality, which we call imagination, that free following out of trains of suggestion called up by emotion, takes the colour, at every step, of the individual make of the poet's nature, and the individual cast of his experience. In so far as a World-view is strictly poetic in origin, the conclusion might seem hard to resist that there may be as many poetic World-views as there are poets. And it is true that the individual quality of the poet will always cleave to whatever is strictly



poetic in his thinking. But even so, it may be possible to determine typical directions in which poetic apprehension tends to engender or to sway belief, and to modify ideas imbibed in education or accepted on authority.

Thus, it may be provisionally laid down that a view of the World reached through poetic experience will tend to accentuate those aspects of Man and Nature, and those ways of regarding them, which offer most scope, analogy, or sanction, to this type of experience. Where the senses play a vital part, and are yet vitally implicated with passion and ideas, there will be little disposition to doctrines which either brand the senses as evil or illusory, or erect them into a sufficing faith. The logical intellect, its processes and conclusions, will receive a respectful but distant salute, while the irrational elements of life are accepted as its needful ingredients or even as a supreme source of its worth. Love, which tramples on reason, and, in the great words of à Kempis, warmly glows like a flame beyond all measure, may be called in some sense the natural religion of the poet. The mysterious love of man and woman, in particular, irrelevant to most of the problems of philosophy, and regarded by religion chiefly as a dangerous disturbing force, is one of the perennial springs of poetry, and one of the shaping analogies of poetic thought. And the same impassioned insight which gives significance to this love exalts also all those other energies of the soul which carry men out of and beyond themselves. Poetry is naturally heroic; it has presided over the cult of the hero, as religion and philosophy over those of the saint and the sage;



it has rewarded him with enchanting secular Paradises, Elysian fields, Isles of the Blest, and Temples of Fame. Poetry is disposed to magnify human nature; the transition from Aeschylus, who painted men greater than they were, to Euripides, who drew them after life, is also a decline in the intrinsic temper of poetry, if in that alone. And because of its bent to think greatly of man, it makes for the assertion, in the great sense, of *freedom*—of man's freedom to be himself. Neither the shibboleths of political freedom nor those of free thought have always, it is true, found response among poets. Their part has rather been to keep alive in mankind the temper which treats outward obstacles not as the soul's constraints, but as its opportunities; the faith that iron bars do not make a cage, and that you may be bounded in a nutshell, and yet not only count yourself, but be, a king of infinite space.

In the interpretation of Nature, poetic experience works creatively or selectively on similar lines. To those wonderful deposits of the imagination of the past, the myths of extinct faiths, from which theology and philosophy have long withdrawn their sanction, or on which they have laid their taboo, the poets have habitually been very tender. And when they felt as poets, the image drawn from a myth has never had merely decorative value, or served merely as a 'poetic synonym' for the exact term. It expressed something in the poet's vision not otherwise to be put into words. If the glorious anthropomorphism of Olympus and Asgard has faded for ever, the mystery of life everywhere pulsing through Nature, and perpetually

reborn in 'Man and beast and earth and air and sea,' cries to the poet with a voice which will not be put by; and the symbols by which he seeks to convey his sense of it, if they read personality too definitely into the play of that elusive mystery, yet capture something in it which escapes the reasoned formulas of science.

Hence many great philosophic ideas about the universe which, without ascribing life or mind to it, might seem projected from our inner, rather than gathered from our outer, experience, have powerfully appealed to poets. The antithesis of the One and the Many, which fascinated and fertilized every phase of Greek thought, had one of its roots in the acute Greek feeling for continuity through change, which is equally manifest in the Parthenon and in the Pindaric Ode, and to a less degree in all art and poetry wherever the sense of rhythm is present at all. 'When we feel the poetic thrill,' says Santayana, 'is it not that we find sweep in the concise, and depth in the clear?' That felicitously expresses the genius of Hellenic art in particular; but it also marks off the specifically poetic apprehension of Oneness as a 'something deeply interfused' in and through the living multiplicity of the world, alike from the mystic vision of a One whose splendour dissolves the reality of things, and from the vision of Peter Bell, for whom nothing but 'things' exists. Yet even this pregnant Oneness has commonly gathered, in the poetic conception of the universe, the higher and richer attribute of soul-life. It has become a living and working Nature vitally implicated in every organ and filament, or Mind diffused through every

limb, or Love, or Beauty, or Power, woven through the woof of it, or the splendour of God irradiating it through and through.

When we turn, as is proposed in what follows, from these general considerations to watch the actual operation of poetic apprehension in concrete examples, we naturally encounter some serious difficulties. Poetic apprehension may be as distinct and definable as we will, but it can rarely be caught acting *in vacuo*. Poets are men; they are usually citizens; they are often penetrated with some form of religious or philosophical faith. It is inevitable, in such cases, that their strictly poetic experience should be coloured or even overridden by ideas proper to their possibly more habitual or more deeply established persuasions. In poets like Goethe and Shelley, deeply concerned with the issues of life outside poetry, philosophic and poetic impulses and data may well seem inextricably mingled. Even Blake and Whitman, who perhaps come nearer than any other moderns to shaping out a poetic World-view for themselves, evidently worked, as poets, under a deep bias of revolutionary dogma, which made them unjust to some aspects of poetry itself. And with poet-exponents of great theological or philosophical systems, like Lucretius or Dante, it may well appear idle to seek to catch the moment when the runnel of poetry carved out a watercourse of its own, instead of falling into and moving along with the great tide of Epicurean or Catholic thought. Yet we attach some meaning to our words when we distinguish periods in which the poetic element

in a poet's nature was more potent than at others. When we say, for instance, that in Shelley the poetic apprehension after 1812 worked itself progressively free from an alien philosophy; or that in Wordsworth, from about the same date, it became progressively overlaid by a theology almost equally alien; or that in Dante's *Convito*, the poet of the *Vita Nuova*, who will finally recover dominance in the *Commedia*, has yielded much ground to the scholastic thinker. Distinctions so clearly felt and sharply drawn cannot be groundless. What is here proposed is to examine whether any typical character or direction can be discovered in the modifications which the data of religious or philosophical beliefs and ideals have undergone in certain commanding poet natures. In that case we might possess some of the material for answering the question I have been bold enough to suggest in the title of this paper.

## II

I begin with examples in which these data are derived from *religion*; and, in the first place, from religion still untouched by philosophic reflection. Without rashly assuming the solution of unsolved or insoluble problems, one may venture to assert that the Homeric epics owe their present form neither to purely religious awe nor merely to conscious and deliberate artistry, but to a poetic apprehension of the world operating upon the data of the savage cults and rituals, the animism, totemism, and magic, which anthropology is gradually deciphering under the palimpsest of their obliterating splendour.



With some aspects of the process we are not here concerned. If 'Homer,' as many modern scholars suppose, disliked human sacrifice and similar barbarities, and tempered or effaced the record of them, he reflects the growing efficacy of civilized, but not necessarily of poetic, ideas. It is otherwise with the transformation, whatever its precise nature and history, which put the defined character and rich personal accent of the Homeric Olympus in place of the psychological fluidity and incoherence of primitive religion. For the childhood of poetry the change possibly involved a loss. A world where there are no barriers, or none which magic cannot dissolve, where gods and men and beasts pass over into one another without resistance or demur, where everything can be done and had if the right formula be pronounced and the due charm applied—such a world is the home and habitat of the fairy tale; but its facile instability must be overcome before a mature poetry, no less certainly than before a mature science, can arise. The Homeric outlook upon the world had as a religion grave flaws, which merited the strictures of later moralists; but it had also, as a religion, magnificent qualities to which they rarely did justice. His deathless figures permanently raised the status of man and the ideals of human achievement; and every line of the poetry is instinct with an assurance of the glory of the world and the goodness of life, and the nobility of heroic emprise, and of reverence and of pity, which justly made his book the Bible of later Greece.

Yet it is plain that even Homer reflects or finds reflection in but a limited tract of the Greek mind;



that there were many deeper, as well as darker, currents in the Greek way of apprehending the world, of which that radiant mirror shows no trace. Humanity had triumphed over the superhuman as well as over the subhuman, clarity over mystery as well as over confusion. The Ionian thinkers of the sixth century swept away the fables of Olympus, fastened on the problem of substance, and proclaimed the sublime discovery that the All is One. The Orphic cults and the Thracian orgies of Dionysus betrayed by the widespread and intimate hold which they won in Greek life, refined and humanized as they doubtless were, that religion in Greece too included the riot of intoxicated rapture as well as clear-eyed piety; the Bacchic frenzy, which carries men beyond themselves, as well as temperate self-reverence and self-control. Both these new elements enriched and uplifted, if at some points they also impoverished and degraded, Greek mentality and the Greek apprehension of the world, religious, philosophic, and poetic alike. The philosophic apprehension of unity reacted on religion, and the two strains coalesced in the sublime theism of Cleanthes' hymn. The Dionysiac rapture reacted on philosophy—without it should we have had the great doctrine proclaimed in the *Phædrus*, of the divine vision won through madness and love? And both reacted upon poetry—above all on tragedy, with its stringent ideal of unity, maintained and manifested through all the phases and moods of conflict, and the alliance, disclosed in its very structure, of Apolline clarity and order with the lyric exaltation of Dionysus. But the matter of tragedy

shows yet more evidently the larger and deeper World-view which poetry has now won. In passing from Homer to Aeschylus we enter an atmosphere in which the gods are hardly ever visible, but which is laden and tense with the sense of divine things. His persons, it was said, are more than human; certainly his gods are sometimes—like the Zeus of the *Prometheus*—less than divine. But the Aeschylean universe has outgrown Olympus without having dispossessed it. A soul of immense reach and depth, apprehending life from many sides, but always with a sense of vast issues and inexhaustible import, here interprets the old stories of man's relations with the gods, and leaves us with a new vision of the possibilities and responsibility of man. His tragic conflicts call incommensurate forces into play, and their apparent solution leaves yet larger problems unsolved. The story of Prometheus ended with his reconciliation to Zeus; and this doubtless expressed the poet's deliberate intention and design. The modern world has remembered Prometheus, not for his final surrender or appeasement, but as the assertor and embodiment of something in man which stands over against the gods he recognizes, and not only endures unflinchingly all that their utmost anger can inflict, but arraigns them himself before a law of Justice higher than their own. Æschylus, we know, was a devoutly religious man, and never dreamed of surrendering his reverence for the divine because of the crimes of the gods. Possibly, as Wilamowitz has suggested, he believed that divinity itself had passed through a youth 'full of foolish noise' to become with ripening years

a righteous God and Father, worthy at length of universal reverence. Reverence for such an erring divinity is hardly distinguishable from forgiveness ; in any case it foreshadows, if it does not announce, the clear recognition of human responsibility. And that recognition is already dominant in the mature work of Æschylus. The traditional superstitions which still entangled the Greek mind—the doctrine of an irresistible fate, or of a divine jealousy attending human greatness—dissolve under the scrutiny of his terrible insight. Man is free even in his crimes, and the greater because he is free. Clytaemnestra chooses and wills as freely as Lady Macbeth ; she is as little the helpless victim of the curse of Atreus as the other of the Witches' spell. It needed a great poet thus to embrace in his vision of life things incompatible to common sense. 'Whether Æschylus is greater,' declares the penetrating interpreter to whom I have referred, 'when he uplifts our hearts by the full tones of surrender to the divine, or when he thrills us with the terrible acts and sufferings of human freewill, every one must decide for himself from his own experience ; but let no one say that he understands the poet until he has known them both.'<sup>1</sup> The poet's eye, 'glancing from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,' overcomes the antinomies of theological dogma ; and herein lies one of the most signal services which poetic apprehension has rendered to thought, and not least to religion.

To pass from Æschylus to Dante is to watch operations of poetic intelligence in which only the

<sup>1</sup> Wilamowitz, *Oresteia*, p. 47.

environment, the material, and the instruments of expression are profoundly changed. The words just quoted of the Greek might apply without the alteration of a syllable to the Florentine ; and if ever poet saw earth and heaven at once it was he. But the theological World-view which he found was more authoritatively established, more intellectual in its philosophical substance, and more rich and beautiful in its human appeal. The fresh fountain of religious feeling, still abundantly flowing, was fortified and entrenched within a vast structure of elaborated dogma, for which councils and saints had supplied the architects and the masons, and ancient philosophy the stones. Within this imposing edifice, nevertheless, Dante, with complete conviction, found and made his home. No one now questions the absoluteness of Dante's Catholic faith, and we should seek in vain for any rebellious upsurging of the poet in him against the starkest of scholastic abstractions. On the contrary, his wonderful gift of style continually finds the material for poetry in the most seemingly arid regions. Sometimes the result is merely an astonishing *tour de force* ; but often we become aware that Dante has not only invented but discovered, and that many a dogma which has the air of being the mere husk of religion is in reality the imperfect, stammering utterance through which religious passion sought to make itself articulate. Dante, in short, makes us feel in these constructions of the intellect the language of the soul.

To do this needed something more than devout belief. It needed the imaginative intuition of a



poet. The poetry of Dante was distinguished from that of his older contemporaries above all by being just this intense soul-vision put into words. 'I simply write down what Love within dictates.'<sup>1</sup> Psychological veracity never fails him. Allegory, in so many hands a tissue of personified abstractions, becomes, in his, a living image of humanity. Symbolic meanings and applications interweave and encircle it, but the core is real. His vision is only on the surface a description—necessarily speculative—of the fortunes of souls after death; its substance, as he tells us, is 'man of his freewill choosing good or evil here.' The human denizens of his hell and purgatory and paradise have undergone no inner change; they are the men he had known, in their spiritual habits as they lived; and their fate, when Dante is thinking most as a poet and least as a theologian, is a continuation of their crucial actions. That Paolo and Francesca are immersed in unquenchable flames satisfies the theological idea of retribution; Dante inflicts on them the more searching penalty of being for ever locked in the embrace of their illicit love. And how often, when he thinks he is devoutly following out to the last consequence the Church's dogma of eternal punishment, he is unconsciously testifying to the poet's sublime faith in the soul of man as stronger than death and hell. 'Who is he,' asks Dante, looking upon Capaneo (*Inf.* xiv. 46), 'who seems not to heed the flame, but lies fiercely unsubdued by the fiery vein?' Or the yet greater picture of Farinata (*Inf.* x. 35), defiantly erect where the rest grovel in agony,

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.* xxiv. 52. 4.



‘as if he held hell in great disdain.’ Even the criminals whom the poet most abhors, and thrusts into the very depths of the abyss, even the traitors guilty of the death of Cæsar or of Christ, he allows still to show greatness of soul; Brutus, champed to a bloody foam in the jaws of Lucifer, is still the Stoic philosopher, and though he writhes in agony, utters not a word (*Inf.* xxxiv. 66). And how wonderfully in the great Ulysses scene (*Inf.* xxvi) the poet takes the pen out of the hand of the theologian, and, forgetting the ‘fraud’ for which the captor of Troy is doing penance in hell, compels us to listen entranced to his tale of that last voyage, beyond the sunset, of the old wanderer, still insatiable of experience, who had kindled his shrinking comrades by bidding them ‘Consider of what seed ye are sprung; ye were not made to live like the brute beasts, but to follow after virtue and knowledge.’ Strange words to issue from the quenchless flames of hell! But Dante goes beyond this. For the sake of the heroism of Cato, he flatly violates the theological categories which condemned him to hell, and makes him the guardian of Purgatory.<sup>1</sup> As for the rest of the ‘virtuous heathen,’ he cannot indeed transfer them from the hell to which the Church has assigned them—a hell much more ferocious than any of which they had dreamed—to Elysium. But he does what he may, and he provides for them within the precincts of hell an

<sup>1</sup> The case of Trajan, who for his justice was said to have been saved by the prayers of Gregory, is not quite parallel, since there was here a theological tradition in his favour. But at least Dante seizes on and emphasizes the tradition, and not merely ‘saves’ Trajan, but makes him the comrade of the glorious just kings in Jupiter (*Par.* xx. 44 f.).

Elysium of green lawns and running streams, 'the one place in the Inferno where there is light and air' (*Inf.* iii). The theological ethic of sin is thus unconsciously crossed, again and again, by the poetic ethic for which 'good' means greatness of soul.

Moreover, with a depth of spiritual insight strangely in contrast with the vulgar notion of punishment which dictated the theological hell, Dante has asserted, even in this realm of iron necessity, the freedom of man. The inmates of hell are not convicts condemned and punished for sins long since repented of: they are there of their own motion and by their own will; and if there is no hope there, it is not because God has no mercy, but because they cannot repent. The souls in Purgatory are held there by no compulsion; they desire nothing but to be purified of their sins, and the moment they desire to mount to Paradise, that moment they are free.

It would be strange, then, had Dante, with all his sense of supreme cosmic forces, not stood for the faith that man is yet the 'captain of his soul.' There he is at one with Æschylus and Milton, and the other great theological poets of the West. Man's 'freedom' is a root idea of the Comedy; and not merely because its purpose was to show him 'in the exercise of freewill,' determining his fate hereafter. Dante went much farther than this. A devoted Catholic and citizen, and eager to welcome the authority both of Church and State, he was driven by the corruption of the one and the anarchy of the other to seek 'another way'—the way of spiritual self-help with the aid of philosophy

and theology, along which he is led by Vergil and Beatrice. The great farewell words with which Vergil leaves him in the Earthly Paradise, 'I crown and mitre thee king and bishop over thyself,' express with thrilling power the individualist—nay, the revolutionary—side of his thought. He would not have been the great poet he was if it had been the only side. Dante's reverence for Vergil and for Beatrice is of the very substance of his self-assertion ; he has crowned and mitred himself by taking them for his guides, and the result is the great poetic cosmos eloquent beyond all the other masterpieces of the world of devout discipleship, and yet instinct in every line with the ardour of a soul 'voyaging through strange seas of thought alone.'

But the name of Beatrice points to another aspect of Dante's work on which the impress of the poet in him is yet more unmistakably set. Measured by the range and compass of thought, and by the richness and delicacy of feeling, which the term in his usage conveys, Dante is the first, as he is the greatest, of the poets of Love. His poetry recovers and renews, or at the least suggests and recalls, all the varieties of intellectual and emotional experience for which philosophy, religion, and romance had, before his time, found in 'Love' the final expression, or the speaking symbol. The cosmic love (*φιλία*) by which Empedocles had first interpreted the universal phenomena which we still, hardly less anthropomorphically, know as 'attraction' ; the passion for another human being (*ἔρως*) in which the author of the *Phædrus* and the *Symposium* discovered one of the sources of the

divine exaltation which emancipates men from their human limits, and endows them with the vision of reality ; the love of God for man, and of man for God (ἀγάπη), proclaimed as the very core of Christianity in the Fourth Gospel—these three types of love, all denoted for Dante by *Amor*, *amore*,<sup>1</sup> were conjoined in his experience with a fourth, distinct from all, though nearly allied to the second : the romantic love of woman which had been the chief inspiration of the poetry of Provence, and which, however sublimated and spiritualized, is enshrined in the *Vita Nuova*. To say that Dante's mind, equally powerful in analysis and in synthesis, confounds these distinctions would be unjust ; but it would be equally untrue to assert that their associations are never blended. Christian philosophy had itself absorbed the first ; cosmic attraction then reappeared in a sublime apotheosis, as the love which draws all the universe towards God, and by which God, as its source, 'moves the sun and the other stars.' And if Dante, in his treatise on poetry,<sup>2</sup> distinguishes himself from the poets of 'love' as a poet of 'morals,' or 'righteousness,' he also, as we saw, ascribes his whole power as a poet to his writing what love dictated in his heart. Man in virtue of his freedom has power to misuse Love, and

<sup>1</sup> The second type I take to be represented, with obvious differences, for Dante by the 'philosophical' love of Guido Guinicelli, the 'father of love poets and my own' (*Purg.* xxvi. 97) ; there is no evidence that he knew anything of this part of Plato ; in any case, of course, this love is for him excited only by woman. The *amore* of Empedocles is mentioned in *Inf.* xii. 42 ; Empedocles himself, as well as Plato, is in Limbo (*Inf.* iv. 138).

<sup>2</sup> *De Vulg. Eloq.* ii. 2.



Dante everywhere scornfully contrasts the higher and the baser love. Nay, all sin which can be 'purged away' he regards as due to 'love' wrongly used; the whole population of Purgatory is there because it loved unwisely, or loved indifferent things too well, or right things too little. But the harm here, for Dante, arises not from love, but from the application to it of the evil material in man's nature—'as a foul impress may be set upon the most precious wax.'<sup>1</sup>

Something of the idealizing atmosphere which Christianity and Plato had thrown about love thus always colours it in Dante's mind. But it is also subtly touched with that other idealizing force which not Christianity but the poets had recognized, which Christian ethics had contemptuously tolerated or scornfully tabooed. Dante had known the love of woman in many forms. Longing for the absent wife and child had consumed his flesh and his bones in exile;<sup>2</sup> and his virginal adoration of Beatrice sprang from no coldness of the blood. The power of womanhood to lift men to supreme heights of vision and fortitude, which he had divined through Beatrice and sung in the great canzone of the *Vita Nuova*,<sup>3</sup> no more passed out of his faith than did her image from his memory. Nor was it for nothing that his master Vergil had forgotten the political and imperial purpose of his poem in making Dido the most moving heroine of antiquity. If the Comedy is a great scheme of salvation, it is also a great song of womanhood such as, he said, no man ever sang before; and if we say that Beatrice is there

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.* xviii. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Canz.* xix.

<sup>3</sup> *Canz.* i.



a symbol for Theology, that is doubtless true: but a thousand phrases remind us how much she symbolizes besides; and the look 'in the eyes of Beatrice,' which draws Dante upward through the circling spheres of Paradise to the beatific vision, attests also his faith in the power of the lover's adoration to lift a man out of his humanity (*trasumanar*), and make him 'joyful even in the flames.'

Thus Dante, though he counted himself not among the poets of love, but among the poets of 'righteousness,' is one of the inspiring sources of the modern poetry which invests the love of man and woman with the ideal attributes which philosophy and religion had proclaimed in other forms of love, but had ignored or repudiated in this. In Spenser—Platonist, Christian, and lover at once—the fusion of the three strains is complete; his great hymns to Love, who

is lord of all the world by right,  
And ruleth all things by his powerful saw,

prelude his even greater hymn of marriage. Even Chaucer perhaps learnt from Dante that amazed awe with which, in the opening lines of one of his earliest Italianate poems, he contemplates the 'wonderful working' of love.<sup>1</sup> The Petrarchists and Sonneteers went far to reduce the expression of this love to hollow phrase-making. But with Romanticism it found fresh and original utterance, and its status in the world has never been more loftily affirmed than by Celtic Romanticizing poets

<sup>1</sup> *Parlement of Fowles*, 1 f.

of to-day. 'I say that Eros is a being!' declares one of the finest spirits among them. 'It is more than a power of the soul, though it is that also. It has a universal life of its own.'<sup>1</sup>

### III

The power of personality and the glory of love : these have emerged from our discussion thus far as the things in life whose appeal to poetic intelligence was most potent in modifying the substance or changing the perspective of a World-view derived from religion. We have now to examine, in a fashion unavoidably even more fragmentary and summary, the reaction of another series of poetic minds upon the more complex and abstruse World-views of *philosophy*.

It is necessary for the purpose to adopt a rough grouping of philosophic systems, and I take the following division into three fundamental types, based with qualifications upon one proposed by Wilhelm Dilthey in the essay already referred to.

To the first belong the naturalistic schools, from Democritus to Hobbes and the Encyclopedists, deriving their philosophical conceptions directly or indirectly from an analysis of the physical world, and commonly disdaining or ignoring phenomena not to be so explained. To the second type of thinkers the objective world is still the absorbing subject of contemplation ; but it is approached not from the side of physics, but from the side of self-conscious mind ; it is felt, not as material for causal investigation, but as responsive to the human

<sup>1</sup> A. E., *Imaginations and Reveries*, p. 151.

spirit, now as living Nature, now as immanent God, now as a progressively evolving Absolute. Here, with various qualifications, we may class Heraclitus, the Stoics, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel. In the third type, the focus of interest and the determining source of philosophic ideas is the self-conscious mind itself. It feels profoundly its own energy and power of self-determination; and it regards the objective world not as deeply at one with it, responsive to its feeling, accessible to its thought, but rather as a threatening power against which it must vindicate its spiritual freedom and build its secure spiritual home. In the philosophies of this type, personality—which the first type ignored and the second reduced to an organ of a world process—became the fundamental condition of our experience, as with Kant and Fichte, or a transcendent personal God shaping the universe to his mind, as with the Plato of the *Timæus*.

If we now consider these three types in relation to our problem, it seems evident that the second and the third are naturally more congenial to poetry than the first. Yet we know that one of the greatest of Roman poets made it the work of his life to expound the atomic Naturalism of Epicurus to an unreceptive Roman world.

The naturalism of Democritus and Epicurus, though framed purely in the interest of scientific explanation, and hostile both to poetry and to religion as commonly understood, was potentially a great poetic discovery, the disclosure of a World-view wholly novel and of entrancing appeal to the poetic apprehension. The sublime perspectives of an illimitable universe, the permanent oneness

underlying the changing shows of sense : these were contributions of philosophy to a poetic outlook of which no poet had yet dreamed, and which it was reserved for the greatest of philosophic poets to make explicitly his own.

But the new way which Lucretius was the first to tread was not to be pursued. He had for many ages no successors. His difficult conquest of poetry from a mechanical system, designed to explain, not to inspire, was only to be emulated by a poet of combined intellectual and imaginative grasp comparable with his own. On the whole, the science and the poetry of Lucretius, after that moment of intense incandescence, fell apart. Vergil, who as a young man saw the rising of this magnificent lonely star in the Roman firmament, and of all his contemporaries perhaps alone understood its significance, honoured the discoverer of the causes of things, but his own philosophy was of a cast easier to harmonize with the idealisms of poetry. From the side of science, Gassendi and the physicists of the seventeenth century valued the Lucretian exposition of atomist theory as a welcome supplement to the fragments of Democritus and Epicurus. But before the nineteenth century scientific materialism was never again allied with great poetic power. The eighteenth century saw an immense advance in the scientific reconstruction of our beliefs about the world, but its nearest approaches to the negations of Lucretius were conveyed only in the prose of a D'Holbach or a Hume, while its most brilliant English poet, far from wrestling, like his friend Berkeley, with the new spectre of materialism raised by the



triumphs of Newton, afforded himself and his readers complete satisfaction by decorating the easy harmonies of deism in the *Essay on Man*. The immense quickening of imaginative power which marked the decades immediately before and after the close of the century widened the chasm between poetry and any mechanical view of the world. If at certain points (as in Shelley's and Coleridge's early chemical ardour, and Goethe's momentous biological researches) poets make fruitful approaches to science, it was because they found in science itself an apparent release from the mechanical point of view, a clue to their ultimate faith (however differently expressed) in a divine, benignant Nature. The recovery of imagination told, in philosophy as in poetry, for the most part, is a wonderful idealization of the universe, culminating in Hegel's evolution of the Absolute and in Wordsworth's awe before the Mind of Man—conceptions which must be discussed in a later section.

But in some very distinguished poetic minds the recovery of imaginative power led to no idealization of the world. It rather enabled them to present with a peculiar poignant intensity a world stripped bare of ideal elements, in which goodness and hope are alike illusory, and Nature is either a dead mechanism or a cruel, implacable and irresistible alien Power. Leopardi, Schopenhauer, Leconte de Lisle, and (on a lower plane) James Thomson, were the most conspicuous examples in the nineteenth century of poetic genius (for Schopenhauer's work is a colossal poem of pessimism) absorbed in the contemplation of a

universe as denuded as that so passionately embraced by Lucretius, of love or hope for man.

A situation analogous to that of Lucretius arises, therefore, in their case. Their world offered no foothold to the optimist: was it equally bare of support for the poet? Bacon's assertion that poetry submits the shows of things to man's desires might imply that; but Bacon (who, incidentally, thought slightly of Lucretius) ignores the poetry born of a conviction that the shows of things are finally unalterable by man's desires, and it is Leopardi, even more than Lucretius, who has shown us how sublime the poetry which rests on this lonely stoicism may be. One might even, in certain moods, be tempted to attach a yet higher value to the temper of this lonely heroism, which faces a blankly hostile universe utterly without support, than to that which exults in conscious Oneness with a universe pervaded by Love or Beauty, by benign Nature or God. The loneliness of Prometheus is more moving as poetry than his rapturous union with Asia. Why is this?

I take it that it is because the lonely Prometheus, the heroic striver with a loveless world, makes us more vividly aware of the Spirit of Man, and that what moves us most in the great poetry is the revelation of the Spirit of Man even more than the revelation of the glory of the universe. We have seen that these two are natural poles of poetic faith, that is, conclusions upon which the thinking of any poet who thinks as a poet, will tend to converge; and if he is thwarted in the one aim he will fall back with the more energy upon the other.

Now this vivid consciousness of spirit, whether shown in heroism or in love, is ultimately inconsistent with a creed which strips the universe of all ideal elements ; and where this is in possession, undermines and disintegrates it. The ' Everlasting No ' yields ground to the Everlasting Yea ; or negation itself is impregnated with divinity, as when Leconte de Lisle glories in his *néant divin*. To imagine heroism intensely is to be convinced that whatever else is illusory, heroism is not an illusion, that the valour of man has a kinship and support somehow, somewhere, in the nature of things. And if heroism is not an illusion, human society is no illusion either. For the heroic struggler with infinite odds is no longer alone ; the army of saints and martyrs are with him ; and it was the poet for whom loneliness opened ways into infinity beyond any companionship who cried to one such heroic struggler, fallen in the fight—

Thou hast great allies.  
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,  
And Love, and Man's unconquerable mind.

I propose to illustrate the working of the forces which thus qualified a creed of negations, from the impressive case of Leopardi.

In Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) we have a poet in whom astonishing power and wealth of mind were united to a complete rejection of the theological and philosophical apparatus of consolation. The mental revolution which left him in early manhood entirely denuded of the beliefs in which he had been reared, was final, and left no trace of reaction or regret, of hesitation or doubt. An

absolute calm of secure conviction marks the entire subsequent course of his short life. Few men who have 'found religion,' once for all, have been brought by it into an anchorage so secure from inner or outer assault as this man who at twenty-two discovered that religion was a dream.

With supernatural belief fell from him also every form of secular faith and hope for man. Religion was but one among the crowd of cherished illusions which cheat men with the expectation of happiness. Human happiness was always founded on illusion, and the pursuit of it was therefore vain. Hence all the organized energies of civilization, the activities of business or politics, of science or art, of the professions, of state administration, counted in his eyes at best as distractions which blinded those who engaged in them to the deadly vision of truth. For himself these distractions and the relief they brought were impossible, for he had seen the truth; and the remorseless analysis which shattered the basis of illusion on which they rested, sapped the impulse to share in them. Of the state, and the patriotisms which bind its members together, he was as sceptical as Ibsen, without sharing his idealizing homage to the man who stands alone. In the *Storia del Genero Umano* he makes Jove introduce the diversities of peoples and tongues among men, seeds of emulation and discord, and send forth among them the 'phantoms' known by the names of Justice, Virtue, Glory, and Love of Country. 'Humanity' itself was an illusory bond, and the 'nations' of the world were ultimately its individual men.

Yet Leopardi does not denounce crime. Man is



for him more unhappy than criminal ; and his evil qualities are to be laid to the charge of the Nature that made him. He is more sinned against than sinning, and Leopardi's profound pity, if often derisive and scornful, never passes into invective. His passionate upbraidings of his countrymen in the boyish canzone *Italy*, like his ardent aspiration after national glory for his country and poetic fame for himself, disappear from the melancholy calm of the *Bruto Minore* and the *Ginestra*.

A great and potent spirit  
Shows itself in enduring, nor will add  
Fraternal hatred, worst of evils, to its griefs  
By blaming Man for them, but lay the charge  
On the true culprit,—Mother of mankind  
By right of birth, and Stepmother in heart.

‘Nature,’ which planted us in this earth, exposed us from birth till death to malign afflictions and lured us into constant pursuit of illusive aims, is responsible for the wrongs which men inflict upon one another in the vain chase ; and Leopardi's nearest approach to the passion of humanity which inspired Shelley, a few years earlier, is the cry of appeal to men which breaks from him, after uttering this indictment of Nature, to band themselves together against her :

Her count the foe, and against Her,  
Believing that man's race, as is the truth,  
Was foreordained to be in league,  
Count all mankind as born confederates,  
And embrace all with unfeigned love,  
Rendering and expecting strong and ready succour  
In the changing perils and the anguishes  
Of the common warfare.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ginestra*, p. 120.

Man in the grip of Nature is like the anthill crushed by a chance-falling apple, and the lava field of Vesuvius, covering extinct cities, where but the broom plant sheds a forlorn fragrance, aptly symbolizes the desolate earth he is doomed to tread. While this earth itself, a vanishing film of vapour in the universe, traverses by its insignificance his dream of immortality. And his humorous irony sports, in the prose dialogues, with this annihilating disparity between man's pretensions and the truth.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the effect of Leopardi's work—and especially of his poetry—is at many points subtly to rectify his desperate view of the world. He cannot suppress the uprush of pity for those whose career in it is prematurely cut short, however his reason may persuade him that they are fortunate.<sup>2</sup> The noble pathos of the Attic grave monuments, representing, for instance, a young girl in the act of taking leave of her friends, overpowers the reflections of his philosophy, and he wrestles in moving verses with the enigma :

Ah me ! why at the end  
Of paths so grievous, not ordain at least  
A happy goal ? But rather robe in gloom  
And terror that for which through life  
We long as the sole refuge from our woes,  
And show us, yet more dread than the stormy sea,  
The port we make for ?

A portrait of a beautiful woman, carved also upon her tomb, overwhelms him with the wonder

<sup>1</sup> *Il Copernico.*

<sup>2</sup> *Sopra un basso rilievo, etc.*

of beauty and the paradox of its conversion into dust :

Ah, human nature, how,  
If utterly frail thou art and vile,  
If dust thou art and ashes, is thy heart so great ?  
If thou art noble in part,  
How are thy loftiest impulses and thoughts  
By so ignoble causes kindled and put out ? <sup>1</sup>

Not less acutely he feels the paradox of artistic creation. Like Abt Vogler he contemplates the 'palace of music' reared by the performer's hand :

Desires infinite  
And visions sublime  
It begets in the kindled thought, . . .  
Where along a sea of delight the spirit of man  
Ranges unseen, as some bold swimmer  
For his diversion the deep. . . .

But a single discord shatters this paradise in a moment. Abt Vogler's creation is not shattered ; he has played to the end, and put the last stone in its place. But it has vanished, and he calls in, to save it, his high doctrine of the eternity of created beauty. Leopardi has no such faith, and he puts the doctrine to a severer test by dissolving the spell of beauty before it is complete. Yet he feels as acutely as Browning the marvel of the musical creation, and that its abrupt dissolution does not cancel the significance of its having been there at all. He does not openly confess that significance, but it stirs in him a tormenting sense of anomaly.

He comes nearer to such confession when he speaks of love. His own experience of love was

<sup>1</sup> *Sopra un ritratto di una bella donna, etc.*

that of a virginal passion; the ideal exaltations which make every lover something of a poet had their way in this great poet unclouded by vulgar satiety. He knows well enough that love arrays the woman, for the lover, in ideal charms not her own; but instead of lamenting or deriding this illusion, as illogically he should have done, he glories in it. Love, like music, 'reveals the mystery of unknown Elysiums,'<sup>1</sup> but these 'lofty images' are accessible only to the man; woman cannot understand them; for such conceptions there is no room in her narrow brow. The stern derider of illusions has here no praise for the sex which sees things as they are: the unconscious idealist in Leopardi takes the side of the 'illusions.'

And his way of speaking about Love elsewhere is less that of the pessimist philosopher than of the Platonist poet who sees in it a clue to real vision. The pessimist in him does full justice to the havoc wrought in the world in Love's name; but after the gods had watched the working of the lower love, their cynical gift, Jove sent down another Love, 'child of Venus Urania,' in pity of the noble hearts who were worthy of it, yet rarely permitting even to them the happiness it brings as 'surpassed in too small a measure by that of heaven.'<sup>2</sup> Love above all else irradiates the waste of life, it is 'the source of good, of the highest joy found in the ocean of existence'; it alone holds equal bliss for man with Death, which for ever allays his ills. 'Love and Death' are twin brothers, and the fairest things on the earth or under the stars.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Aspasia.*

<sup>2</sup> *Storia dell genere umano*

<sup>3</sup> *Amore e Morte.*



Even the memory of love can make 'abhorred old age' endurable, and send a man willingly to the scourge or the wheel, as the face of Beatrice could make her lover 'happy in the flames.'<sup>1</sup> Hence Love makes the heart 'wise,' for it inspires men with the contempt of life:

'For no other lord do men face peril  
With such alacrity as for him.'  
Where thou dost help, O Love, courage is born  
Or wakens; and, against its wont, mankind  
Grows wise in action, not lost in idle thought.'<sup>2</sup>

This is not the language of pessimism; and this 'wisdom' inspired by love, which reconciles men to courageous death, is something quite other than the calculation that death is a release from life's ills. That is the suicide's wisdom, not the hero's. Leopardi's conception of Love has taken up nobler elements than his pessimism could supply; he describes a Triumph of Love over Death, not a shrewd perception that Death is the easiest way out, or even a blessed port after stormy seas.

Yet Love in its noblest form was given, he knows, but to few; and he himself had known it only as a fleeting experience. He knew as a continual possession, on the other hand, his own intellectual nature, the sovran thought which stripped off the illusive shows of things and disclosed to him the naked horror of reality undisguised, but filled him none the less with the exultation of power, and the lofty joy which belongs to discovery even of a tragic truth.

<sup>1</sup> *Consalvo*.

<sup>2</sup> *Amore e Morte*.

Such exaltation finds its most powerful expression in the great hymn to 'Thought the Master.' His restless and piercing intellect was a double-edged instrument. It was not the source of his pessimism, but it furnished the remorseless analysis of the glories and shows of life which gave its air of inevitable logic to his temperamental despair. Yet the exercise of the instrument was itself a vivid joy, and, like love, created for the wielder a lonely earthly paradise within the vast waste of this earthly hell.<sup>1</sup> There he wanders, in an enchanted light, which blots out his earthly state; thither he returns from the dry and harsh converse with the world as from the naked crags of the Apennines to a joyous garden smiling afar. Is this 'terrible but precious gift of heaven' also an illusion? Perhaps; but it is one 'by nature divine,' and capable of possessing us with the secure tenacity of truth itself, as long as life endures.<sup>2</sup>

In any case it created for him definite and wonderful values in the world which detracted dangerously from the consistency of his faith in the world's fundamental badness. 'Thought' was the only civilizer; by thought mankind had actually risen out of their primeval barbarism;<sup>3</sup> it was the sole agent in advancing the public welfare. His towering disdain for the frivolity and utilitarianism of his own age sprang from no mere excess of self-esteem; it was the scorn of one whom 'thought'

<sup>1</sup> 'Che paradiso è quello,' etc.

<sup>2</sup> 'Ma di natura . . .

Divina sei,' etc.

<sup>3</sup> *Ginestra*.

had lifted to a standpoint of ideal excellence beside which all alien impulses seemed intolerable.<sup>1</sup> It armed him with a magnanimity which the sight of any cowardly or ignoble act stung to the quick, which laughed at danger or at death,<sup>2</sup> which could endure with resolute Stoicism and antique valour the passage through the miseries of life.<sup>3</sup>

But thought had its peculiar joys also, less equivocal than these. It fed on the sublimity even of the desolate world, on the loneliness of nature, on the infinity of the starry depths. In the lines on 'The Infinite' he describes a favourite haunt—a lonely hill, from which the horizon is on all sides cut off. 'There I sit and gaze, fashioning in thought boundless distances, superhuman silences, and profoundest rest. . . . In this immensity my thought is drowned, and shipwreck in that ocean is a joy.'

And converse with thought gives him, too, the vision of ideal beauty—a vision which quickens the ecstasy of his most rapturous moments. It is no pallid dream; the fairest face he meets seems but a feigned image of its countenance, a derivative streamlet from the one sole source.<sup>4</sup> That ideal beauty is his lady, but he had never seen her face, for nothing on the earth is like her, or were it like in feature, or in voice, it would be less in beauty.<sup>5</sup> Leopardi is here very near to Shelley. The visionary ideal of beauty and love was not less vividly present to him; but the sterner

<sup>1</sup> *Il Pensiero Dom.*: 'Quasi intender non posso,' etc.

<sup>2</sup> *Il Pensiero Dom.*: 'Giammai d'allor,' etc.

<sup>3</sup> *Bruto Minore.*

<sup>4</sup> *Pens. Dom.* 'Quanto più torno,' etc.

<sup>5</sup> *Alla sua Donna.*

temper of his pessimism was less easily persuaded that it had projected itself into the being of any earthly Emilia. The 'Intellectual Beauty' of Shelley's hymn had its seat and stronghold in a like glow of inner vision, but its 'awful loveliness' was more abundantly hinted or disclosed in the world of nature and of man, giving 'grace and truth to life's unquiet dream,' and luring the sensitive poet on to the pursuit of a thousand fugitive embodiments of its eternal essence. Leopardi's language, marmoreally clear-cut and austere, seems to bear the impress of a mind powerfully self-contained, exempt from all seductions of the senses, even of colour and melody, calm with the resolution of despair. Shelley's language, dissolving form and outline in an ethereal radiance, seems the mirror of a self-diffusive genius which saw all things through the veil of its own effulgence. Leopardi has been called 'the most classical of the romantics'; Shelley was in some sense the very soul of romanticism. But as this very comparison implies, the romantic temper glowed in both. In both, the long travail of existence was crossed by the exultations of the visionary and the idealist. With Leopardi, martyred in his prime by painful disease, the gloomy shades closed in more and more impenetrably upon the world of man and nature, and death was happy because it was the end of life. With Shelley the universe grew more and more visibly transfigured by a spirit deeply responsive to his own; all things worked and moved in beauty, and were woven through and through with love. In Leopardi's more tenacious intellect the negations of a cor-



roding criticism were less easily overcome. But nature, which had armed his brain with that corroding criticism flung across it also the rapturous delight in beauty, in love, in the creative energy of thought itself, and there were moments when poetry transported him beyond the iron limits of his creed, to the belief that love and beauty and thought are neither illusory nor the sources of illusion, but signs and symptoms of an ideal reality.

#### IV

The poetry of negations strives instinctively towards fuller affirmation: that is the purport of our survey hitherto. We have seen in a previous essay how Lucretius the poet saw this mechanical universe through a transfiguring atmosphere of passion and pathos, attachment, regret, not dreamt of in his philosophy.<sup>1</sup> And there are signs enough that had that philosophy admitted, what it fiercely denied, those ideas of a living and personal or even divine Nature, or of a universe pervaded by God, which respond to poetic apprehension at the point where the Epicurean naturalism left it, as it were in the lurch, he would have eagerly embraced them.

Now it was precisely those ideas of life and personality present in Nature, or even pervading the universe, which prevailed among philosophic thinkers of the *second type*, who inquired (to put

<sup>1</sup> The essay on *The Poetry of Lucretius* in the present volume supplements the argument of the present essay at this point, and he is merely referred to here.

it in the roughest way) not how the world might have come about, but what it meant. For the answer, infinitely varied in its terms, uniformly postulated that the idealism of man reflected something answering to it in the very nature of reality. Two profound suggestions towards an ideal conception of the world, thrown out by the genius of Greece, could still intoxicate the intellect of early nineteenth-century Germany:—the Heraclitean idea of the harmony of opposites, and the Platonic and Stoic doctrine of the soul of the world. Of the first I say nothing more here; for Heracleitus, pregnant as his dark sayings are with poetry, has never had his Lucretius.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of a world-soul, on the other hand, has again and again helped poetry to articulate her rapturous apprehension of the glory of the world. For European speculation, at least, the conception had its origin in the *Timæus*, where the last perfecting touch of the divinely-appointed artificer who constructs the world is to give it a ‘soul’ and make it ‘a blessed god.’

In the pantheism of the Stoics, the idea of a divine world-soul set forth in this grandiose myth became a radical dogma, one of the chief sources of their significance as an intellectual and moral force. At Rome the Stoic pantheism softened the rigour of national and social distinctions. The humanity of the Roman law lies in the direct line of its influence. In the mind of the most sensitive and

<sup>1</sup> His famous illustration, quoted by Plato, is the harmony of the lyre brought about by the balance of opposite forces in the strings. Plut. *Is. et Osir.* (quot. Ritter and Preller, p. 17), Plat. *Symp.*, p. 187.

tender of Roman poets, on the other hand, the Stoic idea fell upon a soil rich in qualities uncongenial, if not unknown, to its native habitat. Stoic thought in Vergil, no less than Epicurean in Lucretius, has taken the colour of that richer soil. The sublime verses which he puts in the mouth of Anchises have riveted this solution, if such it be, of the world-riddle upon the mind of posterity; but the real contribution of Vergil is less in any expressive phrase or image than in the diffused magic of a temperament in which all subtle and delicate attachments wonderfully throve; where, more than in any other Roman mind, the 'threefold reverence' of Goethe, the reverence for what is above us, for what is below us, and for our fellow-men, found its congenial home.

And it is not hard to see how sheer poetic instinct drew him this way. His two great masters in poetry, Homer and Lucretius, had inspired and helped to mould a genius fundamentally unlike either. The majestic pageant of the Olympians was not at bottom more consonant to his poetry than the scorn which tramples on all fear of divinity and puts the roar of Acheron under its feet. The Jupiter and Venus and Juno and Pallas who so efficiently order the changing fortunes of Æneas are but a splendid decoration, like the Olympian figures in Raphael's frescoes at the Farnesina. And well as he understands the bliss of the triumphant intellect, of Man become the master of things, he is himself content with the humbler joys of one who has acquaintance with Pan and the Nymphs, with the gods of the woodland and the fountain-spring. These were real for him, not

it may be with the matter-of-fact reality of the senses, but as speaking symbols of something more deeply interfused, less articulate than man, but more articulate to man's spirit than the fountains or the flowers.

The great pantheistic phrases of Vergil have echoed, we know, throughout the after-history of poetry. We might even be tempted to say that pantheism, in some sense, must be the substance of any 'poetic view of the world.' But if so, it must be a pantheism which owes at least as much to the entranced intuition of the poets as to the abstract thinking of philosophy. Their ecstasy of the senses, their feasting joy in the moment, and in the spot, have enabled them not merely to express the creed of pantheism with greater freshness and sincerity, but to give it interpretations and applications of which theoretic speculation never dreamed. We should not prize the great lines of *Tintern Abbey* so far above the eloquent platitudes of the *Essay on Man* if we did not feel that Pope was merely putting philosophy at second-hand into brilliant verse, while Wordsworth had not only reached his thought through his own impassioned contemplation, but actually given it a new compass and profundity not attainable by any logical process. He found his 'something more deeply interfused' as he looked with emotion too deep for tears upon the humble flower and the simple village child, or remembered the experiences of his own wonderful boyhood; and these were for him not merely portions of a body of which God was the soul, but themselves luminous points, or running springs, of spiritual light and life. So





with Dante as Spenser with Plato. Yet some distinctions seem to assert themselves even in that ecstatic love-interwoven universe of his. His poet's intense consciousness of personality sounds clear through the pantheistic harmonies. When he is trying to utter as he sees it the sublime paradox of the dead but deathless poet, he falls successively, heedless of inconsistency, upon symbols drawn from the dogmas of antagonistic schools of thought. Pantheism, individual immortality, heaven, Elysium—he draws upon them all, but none suffices. The dead poet is made one with Nature, becomes a part of the loveliness which once he made more lovely; his voice is heard in the nightingale's song. But he is also an individual soul, who has passed at death to the abode where the Immortals are, and is welcomed there by Chatterton and Sidney and Lucan and the rest. A cognate depth and reach of apprehension has perplexed the discoverers of contradiction in *In Memoriam*. 'For the poets,' aptly comments Mr. Bradley, though he is thinking chiefly of Shelley and Tennyson, 'the soul of the dead in being mingled with nature does not lose its personality; in living in God it remains human and itself.'<sup>1</sup>

In comparison with the magnificent audacities of pantheism and cosmic love, the philosophic conception of 'Nature' has enjoyed the position of a great authoritative commonplace, by invoking which the most mediocre poet could dignify and quicken his verse. It belonged to science as much as to poetry, and to the poetry of clarified good sense by as good right as to that of childlike in-

<sup>1</sup> *A Commentary on In Memoriam*, Introd.

tuition. It could stand for the ideal of just expression which Pope counselled the poet 'first to follow,' as legitimately as, a century later, it was to stand for the living presence of Beauty, of whose 'wedding' with the soul Wordsworth chanted the spousal verse, or as the teeming creative energy whose infinity Faust sought vainly to clasp. But even that Augustan 'Nature' gathered something from the quality of the minds which pursued literary discipline by its light, and no one doubts that in Wordsworth or in Goethe the *φύσις* or *natura* of strictly philosophic speculation was but the fecund germ of a poetic creation, which, whether it answered to a cosmic reality or not, answered to deep-seated and ineffaceable instincts and needs of man. Only, if great and original genius has set its hall-mark upon this noble metal, the crowd of small poets have mixed it with their feeble alloys. There is a Nature which responds to the greatest and sublimest aspirations of man, and one which answers to his self-indulgent dreams; a Nature which is wedded to his soul, and one which is but the casual mistress of his light desires. If the term 'poetical' has a slightly derisive air, it is because a cheap glamour, which disguises truth, so often replaces the profound symbol which touches its core. A truly 'poetic' World-view has at any rate nothing to do with this second-rate romance.

Among the poetic ways of regarding *Nature*, there are two types, the distinction between which concerns us. It is shadowed forth in the two images I borrowed just now from Wordsworth and from *Faust*. We may feel Nature as intimately

united to us, deep calling to deep. Or we may feel it as something which eludes our clasp, but holds us by the very appeal of its affinity to that which is infinite in ourselves. The first type is too familiar to be further discussed here. But the second, or Goethean type, needs a few words.

For it was with Goethe that a new and powerful philosophic influence tardily entered modern poetry—the influence of Spinoza. A quarter of a century before Wordsworth and Coleridge were overheard talking of him at Nether Stowey, Spinoza had found deep springs of sympathy in the young Goethe. A vivid passage in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Book XIV) tells us that what especially fascinated him was ‘the boundless unselfishness that glowed in every sentence,’ and notably that ‘strange sentence’ which later suggested a famous retort of his Philine—‘He who loves God must not expect that God shall love him in return.’<sup>1</sup> Spinoza’s God meant, roughly, the infinity of Nature, and to love God meant to see all things in the light of that infinity. Such a dictum therefore cut at the root of the whole body of poetry which asserted an answering spirit in Nature, from the self-indulgent dreams of romantic sentiment to the love-interwoven universe of Dante or Shelley. The grandeur of Spinoza’s conception is apparent enough even in his geometrical formulas, but Goethe’s intense intuition translated it into human experiences which stir us to the depths. The Erdgeist’s retort to Faust—‘Du gleichst dem Geist den du begreifst, nicht mir’—is one of the most thrilling in all poetry, not because it indulges all

<sup>1</sup> *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, iv. 9.



our wishes, nor yet because it baffles them, but because the barrier it opposes to the intellect is a gate to the imagination, and we step out into a poetic apprehension of the infinity which our formulas seek to capture in vain.

It is by a like suggestion of infinities beyond our reach and untouched by our emotions that he moves us in poems like *Das Göttliche* or *Die Grenzen der Menschheit*, or the opening scene of the Second Part of *Faust*, which insist with so lofty a calm on our limitations. From these infinities, if we wish to live and act, we must turn away, and that is what, as a wise physician, Goethe bids us do. The intolerable glory of the sun is broken up for us in the many-hued rainbow, and this refracted light must be the guide of our life. But no one could see life there who had not himself gazed on the glory of the sun, and while we read Goethe's words we evade the very limitations he imposes, just as Shelley (in the great kindred passage), by the very image which condemns life as a dome of many-coloured glass, lifts us into the 'white radiance' beyond. 'A little ring bounds our life,' he says elsewhere, 'and many generations succeed one another on the endless chain of their being.' A little ring on an endless chain—a 'little life rounded with a sleep,'—that way lies a poetry as great as that which comes to the visionary Celt who sees 'waving round every leaf and tree the fiery tresses of that hidden sun which is the soul of the earth.'<sup>1</sup>

But that way, also, lies a poetry of Man, a poetry which has its sustaining centre not in the cosmos,

<sup>1</sup> A. E., *The Renewal of Youth*.

but in the soul. To refuse the easy assumption of Nature's comradeship in our sorrow, to resign the cheap consolations of the 'pathetic fallacy,' may be the way not merely to resignation, or Stoicism, but to an apprehension of the heights and depths of the soul thrown back upon itself, and fetching strength not from any outer power, but from undreamed-of inner resources of its own. When Wordsworth, in the grasp of a great sorrow, puts aside the glamour of the poet's dream, in order to bear with fortitude 'what is to be borne,' he has taken a step towards that poetry. When he finds in suffering 'the nature of infinity,' with gracious avenues opening out of it to wondrous regions of soul life, he has entered it.<sup>1</sup>

## V

We have thus watched the modification of naturalistic atomism, of pessimistic materialism, and of the cosmic conceptions of 'pantheism' and 'Nature,' by the immediate intuition, the eager senses, and the vivid soul-consciousness which characterize the poetic apprehension. It remains to glance, finally, at the relations of poetry with that third type of philosophic system, in which soul-consciousness itself has played the guiding and master part.

It was with the assertion of the soul's predominance that European philosophy, in the full sense of the word, began. When Socrates turned from the cosmic speculations of the Ionians to found his 'thinking-shop' at Athens, and chaffed Anax-

<sup>1</sup> The lines from *The Borderers* are in fact, of course, earlier than those from *Peele Castle*.

agoras for having put mind at the head of things and then given it nothing to do, he was preparing the way, we know, for the magnificent soul-sovereignty established by the master of all idealists. Plato set up a trenchant dualism between soul and sense, and thrust the sense-world into a limbo of disparagement from which, where his spell prevailed, it never emerged. The body was the soul's prison; the sense cheated it with illusion and dragged it down with base desires.

The Transcendentalists of modern Germany established a soul-autocracy differently conceived, and founded upon other postulates, but not less absolute. Kant shattered the claims of *Verstand*, but only to enthrone *Vernunft*; Fichte found nothing real and nothing good that was not rooted in heroic will; Schopenhauer built up a philosophy of self-effacement and world-flight on the doctrine that the will to live which tortures us is also the malign indwelling energy of the world. And none of them surpassed in calm audacity the claims made for individual reason by Fichte's English contemporary, Godwin.

Speculation of this type was already allied to poetry by the boldness of its 'subjective idealism,' and it might be expected that its points of fruitful contact with poetry would be correspondingly numerous. Yet this is hardly, on the whole, the case. If Plato's influence on poetry is hard to measure, if Kant taught something vital to Schiller, and Schopenhauer to Wagner, 'subjective' philosophers and poets in the main pursued their common preoccupation with soul along paths which rarely crossed. Each brought to the exploration

of that marvellous mine a lamp of extraordinary power ; but they carried it into different regions, surveyed them on different methods, and returned with different results. Poets without any scientific psychology have, in virtue of imaginative insight into the ways of character, created a mass of psychological material with which scientific psychology has only begun to cope. It is only among poetic portrayals of the second rank, such as Jonson and the allegorists, that theoretic categories of character have had any determining weight. The supreme characters of literature are true creations, creations that are at the same time discoveries—pieces of humanity which exceed Nature's 'reach,' perhaps, but not her 'grasp.' Prometheus, Hamlet, Satan, Faust, permanently enlarged the status of the human soul in our common valuation of life. That 'discovery of Man' which intoxicated the Renaissance was pre-eminently a discovery of the stature of man's soul—'how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, . . . in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!' but philosophic ideas hardly touched the surface of either Shakespeare or Marlowe, and they furnished but one strand in the woof of the mind of Milton.

In the English poetry of the time of Wordsworth there is more affinity to philosophic ideas, but their actual influence is apt to be strongest just where the poetry itself is least intense. In a very luminous lecture Mr. Bradley has traced the relation between the two movements.<sup>1</sup> An exalted

<sup>1</sup> *English Poetry and German Philosophy in the Age of Wordsworth* (Manchester University Press).



faith in soul possessed and inspired both, but each was in the main unconscious of the other. In the poetry of his own countryman, Schiller, Kant's austere ideas reappear transformed in the crucible of the poet's livelier emotions or quicker sense of beauty. Coleridge drank as deeply of Kantian and cognate ideas, but only when the brief chapter of his creative poetry was all but closed ; while the magnificent prose-poem in which Carlyle conveyed the philosophy of Fichte-Jean-Paul-Teufelsdröckh stands alone. What Wordsworth may have drawn through Coleridge's talk is not clearly distinguishable from the original bent of his own mind. The two streams ran courses largely parallel, but in distinct though adjacent valleys. With Godwin's ideas, on the other hand, both Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley had stood in close intellectual relations. And these were precisely the men whose poetry set the deepest impress upon their view of life.

Is it possible by the help of either the parallel or the derivative relationship to lay down any common features in the process ?

In the first place, the stress on the exaltation of spirit is shifted by the poets, and with great emphasis, from 'reason,' the instrument of philosophy, to imagination. Reason is constantly not merely ignored but openly slighted. It is not what they mean when they exalt 'mind.' When Wordsworth tells us, in the great *Recluse* passage, of the awe, beyond Empyrean or Erebus, with which he contemplated 'the mind of man' ; when he sees the heroic devotion of the fallen Toussaint perpetuated in 'man's unconquerable mind' ; when he encourages those who doubted Spanish heroism

with the sublime assurance that 'the true sorrow of humanity consists in this: not that the mind of man fails, but that the course and demands of life so rarely correspond with the dignity and intensity of human desires';—by this 'mind' he means imagination, passion, heroic will, but not discourse of reason. Wordsworth, apprehending soul with his poet's intuition, apprehends it as he knew it in himself. He saw it, therefore, as an energy operating not through 'meddling intellect' but through vision and vision-illuminated will, with open eye and ear for its indispensable associates, and love as its core. The 'soul' whereby alone the nations shall be great and free was something in which the humblest peasant and the simplest child had part, and in which the meanest flower struck answering chords. It is not accident that the soul-animated England of Wordsworth's ideal is so utterly unlike Hegel's Prussian state.

In William Blake soul-autocracy became aggressive and revolutionary, and the breach with reason, philosophic or other, widened to a yawning gulf. Whether he is declaring 'the world of imagination to be the world of eternity,' scoffing at the nature-lover who sees 'with' not 'through' the eye, or affirming that 'to generalize is to be an idiot'—(a stupendous example of the procedure he derides)—he stands for a poetry stripped bare of all that allies it either to philosophy or to common sense. His prophetic books adumbrate a grandiose poetic metaphysic, a world-system framed to the postulates of this denuded poetry. And Shelley's *Apology* enthrones imagination as the creator and upholder of all civilization.

Secondly, the poetic shifting of the stress, within the domain of the autocratic soul, from reason to imagination and feeling, told powerfully upon the ethical ideals proclaimed by this group of poets. It added fresh impetus to that disposition to override or transcend external standards of morality which is inherent in all vivid inner consciousness. Moral distinctions fade in the inner illumination of the mystic. We have seen hints of such a 'transvaluation of ethical values' disarranging the iron categories of Dante's Hell. Applied to Hamlet or Othello, the traditional categories of good and evil break in our hands. Milton's heroic devil, and the lovers whom Browning scorns for being saved by their sloth from crime, still perplex the moralist. But the poets of the Revolution are openly sceptical of morality. Of Shelley I need not speak. Even Wordsworth makes a hero of a murderer. And Blake first proclaimed explicitly, a century before Nietzsche, a good 'beyond good and evil,' and figured the inauguration of this transcendent ethic in the colossal symbolism of his Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

In all these writers, it is true, their attitude to morality was in part derived from the bias towards emancipation then current in all departments of ethical, social, and political life, and had no relation to specifically poetic apprehension. 'Freedom' was an ideal for Godwin and for Robespierre, as well as for Shelley and for Kant, and was pursued by them with equal devotion in their several fashions. But they all, also, understood it in the light of their several preoccupations. With Godwin,

as with Robespierre, it is mainly negative ; with Shelley, as with Kant, it acquires positive substance and content. And this is because both philosopher and poet see it as the means to some perfection of the soul. The soul-autocracy of the age, extravagant as it might be, is seen at its noblest in the Kantian freedom won through duty, and in the Shelleyan freedom won through Love. The Kantian ideal of freedom interpreted in that last conclusion of Goethe's wisdom—' He alone is free who daily wins his freedom anew '—has passed into the very substance of the strenuous German mind. The Shelleyan ideal is of a rarer but also of a more perilous stuff, and has touched no such chords in the English character as his music has stirred in the English ear. But something of the genius of both ideals was gathered up and concentrated in Wordsworth's great affirmation of the meaning of national freedom.

Wordsworth's sense of law corrects what is anarchic in Shelley, as Shelley's flame-like ardour corrects what is prosaic and common in Wordsworth. Together they present more purely than any of their contemporaries the noble substance of a poetic ethic. In that poetic ethic the greatest word, rightly understood, is still the Shelleyan Love.

And it may be that if there is any ideal which, springing from poetic apprehension, is yet fit, rightly interpreted, for the common needs of men, it is that ' love of love ' on which Tennyson, so far always from the revolutionary temper either in love or poetry, set his finger in his early prime, as the sovereign endowment of the poet. Only



it must be love wide enough to include every kind of spiritual energy by which the soul, transcending itself, fulfils itself, and exerts, whether upon men or nations, its liberating and uplifting power: the love which creates, and the love which endures; the love which makes the hero or the artist, and that which spends itself inexhaustibly on a thankless cause; the impersonal ardour of the mind, which Spinoza called the 'intellectual love of God,' and the impassioned union of souls, which to some has seemed a clue to the vision of reality, and to others the surest pledge of a future life; the love of country which distinguishes the true service of humanity from a shallow cosmopolitanism; and the love of our fellow men, which distinguishes true patriotism from national greed. To have had no mean share in sustaining this large ideal of the 'soul' which makes us free is an enduring glory of the poets.

Nor is this strange if, as I trust this partial survey may have served to suggest, the spiritual energy transcending itself, for which Love is the most adequate name, be the core of the World-view towards which, from their various religious or philosophic vantage-grounds, a number of poetic master-spirits have made an approach. Whether they have found it as a light kindling the universe, like Dante and Shelley; or as a creative power shadowed forth in the eternal new birth of all things, like Lucretius; or as the will and passion of the human soul, heroically shaping its fate, and divining its infinity most clearly when most aware of its limitations, like Goethe; in some form the faith that spiritual energy is the heart of

reality was the centre towards which they knowingly or obscurely strove. Such a faith, I suggest, will be found to be a vital constituent of every view of the world reached by a poet through his poetic experience, and the main contribution of that rich, profound, and intense form of experience to man's ultimate interpretation of life.

*Printed in Great Britain by*  
UNWIN BROTHERS, LIMITED  
WOKING AND LONDON













588

598

